EXPLORING CULTURAL PRACTICES IMPEDING
GIRLS' SECONDARY EDUCATION IN MALAWI:
THE CASE OF LILONGWE RURAL WEST EDUCATION DISTRICT (LRWED)

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate underlining cultural factors impeding girls' secondary education in Lilongwe Rural West Education Division (LRWED) of Malawi. Underperformance of girls in comparison to boys in their education persists. Hence the need to explore the underpinning social-cultural factors is there. The study employed a mixed methods research design. Using a multi-stage sampling approach, a sample of 295 respondents was selected from five cluster leader government secondary schools in LRWED comprising of headteachers, teachers, Form 4 female students, and parents. Data were generated through survey questionnaires, Key Informant Interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGD). Findings indicated that key social-cultural factors affecting girls' education in LRWED include girls' initiation ceremonies, unplanned pregnancies, early marriages and poverty. Initiation ceremonies were found to contribute to early sex experimentation that undermined girls' continued interest and persistence in education through poor retention, repetition, and subsequent dropout. The findings further revealed that the absence of sex education in the schools' curriculum is the lead cause of parental dependence on local initiation ceremonies. This implies that the incorporation of cultural and sex education in schools' curricula or programs could help curb parental dependence on initiation ceremonies for girls' sex education and the challenges of early marriages and school dropout influenced by social-cultural factors.

INTRODUCTION

Girls' education has been on both global and national agendas for some time and yet the inequalities in terms of access, retention, achievement, and accomplishment persist (MoEST, 2014a; Robertson, Cassity & Kunkwezu, 2017). According to the World Bank (2009), education for girls is one of the pathways to promoting social and economic development. Therefore, increasing the level of girls' education in a country has a favorable impact on economic growth (World Bank, 2004).

Over the past three decades, the enhancement of girls' education has been shaped by several key human rights declarations and conventions and feminist theories (Agassi, 1989; Akkerman & Stuurman, 1998; Ferguson, 1985, Lorber, 2010; UN, 1948; UN,1962; UN,1966; UN,1979; UN, 2010; UNESCO, 2003). Many countries incorporate these human rights and feminist perspectives into their national goals for implementation (UN, 2015). Despite all these efforts, we still live in a world where education is characterized by extensive gender inequalities (Herz & Spurling, 2004). For example, the World Bank reports that there is a lack of progress in positive indicators on decreasing the gender gap in basic education. It is estimated that 481 million women 15 years and older lack basic literacy skills and that 64 percent of the total number are illiterate, a percentage virtually unchanged since 1990 (World Bank, 2015). Cultural practices are considered key impediments to girls' education (Chimombo, 2000 et. al; Hyde & Kadzamira, 1994; Kadzamira & Chibwana, 2000). The focus of this study, therefore, was to re-examine underlining cultural factors impeding girls' education in order to provide a more detailed account. The study adopted the 'child rights-based approach' (CRBA) as a framework of normative concepts, according to international human rights instruments (Das, 2010).

The focus on girls' education is due to persistent gender inequalities in the education sector in Malawi which threatens the country's development ambitions. Around 4.6 million people are illiterate, with approximately 50% of these within the productive age group of 15 – 60. The literacy rate for men is 81% in comparison to women at 68% (Malawi Government, 2014). Girls are particularly under-represented at the secondary and tertiary education levels.

About 43 % of the secondary school population is girls, and women constitute less than 30 % of tertiary education enrollment. More girls are prone to grade repetition and school dropout. The most commonly reported reason for girls and boys dropping out of school in the 2018 Malawi Government's Education Management and Information Systems (EMIS) survey collected by heads of schools was family responsibilities followed by lack of interest. According to literature, pregnancy is one of the major reasons that contributes to girls dropping out of school in Malawi and this perpetuates poverty. Unfortunately, reproductive health is inadequately taught in Malawi's schools and does not teach young people to make well-informed choices before becoming sexually active (Gondwe, 2016). While gender parity seems to have been achieved in the lower primary grades, that is, Standards One to Four, the parity cases rapidly drop from Standard Five to Standard Eight, the last primary school grade (MOEST, 2014b). The pattern is the same for secondary education. This calls for a more nuanced understanding of the cultural factors contributing to this challenge.

PURPOSE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of this study was therefore to investigate underlining sociocultural factors that affect girls' participation in secondary education in Lilongwe Rural West Education District. The research questions for the study are:
1. What are girls' beliefs about secondary education in LRWED?
2. What underpinning sociocultural factors affect the participation of girls in secondary education in LRWED?
3. What other cultural-related factors affect girls' participation in secondary education in LRWED?

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

It is critical to first understand the approaches being advanced in the promotion of girls' education as this lays the basis for understanding the findings of this study. Literature on how girls' education is promoted is vast and complex. To a greater extent, it revolves around human rights and feminist perspectives. The feminists continue analyzing the challenges girls face in education to establish the root causes of their subordination and specifically, how cultural practices contribute to tMany feminist scholars have attempted to classify feminism itself in order to understand the underpinning causes of women's oppression (Agassi, 1989; Akkerman & Stuurman, 1998; Effiong & Inyang, 2020; Ferguson, 1985; Lorber, 2010). This article focuses on how cultural factors subjugate girls in their participation in education. Cultural practices and traditions, particularly in African countries, are mentioned as being among the factors that contribute to the subordination of a girl and impede her education (Effiong & Inyang, 2020).

Apart from the feminist theories, the human rights approach has also been championed the promotion of girls' education (Effiong & Inyang, 2020). Critics of the human rights approach, however, contend that two aspects that continue subordinating women stand out and these are (a) androcentric and (b) the public and private split that are embedded in patriarchy. They believe these aspects were at play when the first human rights declaration was made in 1948 and that the 'speakers' at such conferences were men and men continue dominating. Androcentric refers to the degree to which a society is male-dominated, male-identified, and male-centered (Johnson, 1997). This is indeed the position in most African countries where men dominate. However, women play a great role in educating girls on cultural practices than men.

In terms of the public and private spheres of human rights, it is a considered view that the public sphere is controlled by governments that are also androcentric and the public sphere regulates human rights (Parisi, 2017). With the low participation of girls in education, it is fair to conclude that governments are struggling to enforce human rights declarations to enhance education for girls. The private sphere suggests that men are in control of the private lives of the family, including women and children (Charlesworth, 1995), an idea we partially subscribe to. We believe that women control their families, particularly the girl child. We contend that men are not in full control of the private sphere.

The United Nations human rights conventions and declarations task members declare to remove discrimination in the education system which guarantees women and girls a right to education. They also emphasize children's right to education and compulsory basic education for all. Malawi subscribes to all these conventions in addition to the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, Article 11 (UN, 1989) which requires State parties to take special measures to ensure equal access to education for girls and introduce the readmission agenda for girls. There is also the African Youth Charter (AYC) Article 13 (UN, 2006) which further places emphasis on girls' readmission and cultural appropriateness to sexuality education. Subscribing to these global policies shows Malawi's long commitment and compliance to promoting girls' education among others yet participation of girls is still not satisfactory. As part of complying efforts with these global goals, Malawi has domesticated these global policies in its education policy and planning strategies to promote girls' education. The policies provide a common vision for girls' education, addressing issues that cause the girls not to effectively participate in schooling and also providing a framework of action that ensures full participation of stakeholders (MOEST, 2014a).

The reason women support cultural practices can be understood within the theory of cultural feminism Pearson, (1995 as cited in Effiong and Inyang, 2020). Cultural feminism places more emphasis on the positive qualities associated with women's roles. It is concerned with the issue of how much women are alike and different. Pearson (1995 as cited in Effiong and Inyang, 2020) further notes that cultural feminism is concerned with gender differences or similarities across some cultural settings. We find this to be a very critical ideology that can influence girls' behavior. Parents, as custodians of cultural values, lead in providing what is considered good behavior for their girl children. It is common in African culture, like Malawi, to see girls very close to their mothers than to their fathers. It has been customary to see mothers inviting counselors to initiate secret knowledge to their girls that the mothers would like their children to know. Women are therefore at the center of girls' initiation ceremonies and the expectation is that the girls are initiated to good behavior and knowledge that is expected of a woman to be.

Interestingly, the cultural relativist position on human rights allows women to select what human rights to follow and some that are followed are detrimental to the education of girls. Mayer (1995) notes that the universal position is that human rights are inalienable and held by all members of the "human family," whereas the cultural relativist position argues that "members of one society may not legitimately condemn the practices of societies with different traditions" (p. 176). This might therefore position women in a dilemma of whether to follow individual rights or group rights. Parisi (2017) observes that women may agree with the right of their cultural group to practice their culture while at the same time disagreeing with how these cultural practices affect their autonomy and agency. These could be the underlining principles that allow women to encourage girls to participate in cultural practices that are detrimental to their education. Such women adopt a cultural relativist position.

Sociocultural Factors Inhibiting Girls' Participation in Education

Malawi, like many African countries, has several socio-cultural factors that impede girls' education. Initiation ceremonies, early and forced marriages, and pregnancies are mentioned as key factors inhibiting girls' education. UNICEF (2005) discovered that a wide array of negative and harmful practices often masked as 'culture' affects the participation of girls in schools. These become the basis of social norms, practices, and rules which in turn inform masculine and feminine identities. These identities and ideologies are defended as traditional and are immutable (Plan International, 2012). We recognize that studies have identified these as key challenges to girls' education (Chimombo, 2000; Geiger, 2002; Hyde & Kadzamira, 1994; Kadzamira & Chibwana, 2000; Kapakasa, 1992; MoEST, 2014b; Plan International, 2012; Samati, 2013) and our quest is to find out whether these also contribute to low participation of girls in LRWED and attempt to find the underlining factors. We worry that the human rights approach advocated by the UN which governments continue to subscribe to in fighting for the eradication of these harmful practices bears minimal achievement, at least, in the least Developed Countries (LDC) like Malawi.

Theoretical Framework: A Child Rights-Based Approach (Crba) To Girls' Education

The study adopted the 'Child Rights-Based' Approach (CRBA) as a framework of normative concepts, according to international human rights instruments, with a special focus on the protection and promotion of human rights entitlements. The CRBA finds a strong basis in international human rights instruments, including the UN Conventions on the Rights of the Child which has provisions on education *(Article. 28),* non-discrimination *(Article. 2),* development to a

child's fullest potential *(Article. 6),* participation *(Article. 12)* and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child *(Articles. 11, 15, 21, 24)* (UN, 1989). According to Das (2010), the rights-based approach necessitates a commitment to recognize and respect the human rights of children while they are in school which will contribute to increased retention rates making the process of education empowering, participatory, transparent, and accountable. It entails making education accessible for every girl and boy. It provides an environment in which all can learn effectively regardless of location and economic or social status.

METHODOLOGY

Study Design

This study adopted a pragmatic worldview that allows the use of a mixed-methods approach to inquiry to understand a research problem (Creswell, 2009; Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2007). According to Morgan (2007) pragmatism opens the door to multiple methods, different worldviews, and different assumptions, as well as different forms of data generation and analysis which this study adopted. Elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches were combined for the broad purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie & Turner 2007).

Population and Sampling

The study was conducted in the Lilongwe Rural West Education Division (LRWED) in Lilongwe district. The division has 37 public secondary schools, each having about ten feeder primary schools in the district.   A multistage sampling method was used. First, purposive sampling was used to pick LRWED out of the 6 education divisions in Malawi namely Northern Education Division (NED), Central East Education Division (CEED), Central West Education Division (CWED), Shire Highlands Education Division (SHED), South East Education Division (SEED) South West Education Division (SWED) and Lilongwe Rural West Education Division (LRWED) itself.

LRWED is in a geographically rural setting where secondary schools enroll many students from feeder primary schools within the rural catchment areas. Girls' participation in this area is in the lowest quantile (MOEST, 2015) which may well represent diverse practices that impinge on girls' right to education resulting in low participation. According to Creswell (2009), in purposive sampling, the researcher selects particular elements in the research that will be representative or informative about the topic under study.

The selection of the schools was convenient and purposeful. At this stage, 5 public schools were selected. First, the schools had to be cluster leader schools because they are better equipped and well organized, making them capable of having up-to-date information to help address the research questions accessible and would also present a diverse setting. Thereafter, a sample of 145 participants composed of 5 headteachers, 40 teachers, 60 parents and 40 Form 4 female students were conveniently and purposefully sampled to participate in the study in order to generate qualitative data using Focus Group Discussions (FGD) guidelines with specific groups of participants. These homogeneous samples helped to generate in-depth information about each subgroup. This is because FGD typically involves bringing together people of similar backgrounds and experiences to participate in a group interview. The selection was governed by the need to capture information on factors that impinge on girls' education. Accordingly, headteachers as education custodians, were

key informants since they were information-rich and would provide the required information on girls' education as well as the challenges affecting their participation which would ably answer the research questions. Teachers were selected since they were well informed and had lots of experience to do with girls' education being education custodians. All parent participants selected had wards from the school registers in the 5 public schools. Finally, Form 4 female students were selected because they would be informative about the topic under study by sharing their lived experiences throughout the four years in their different schools. In the five schools, Form Teachers picked 10 girls with proven proficiency in the English language purposely, with the assumption that they would understand the research questions and answer them accordingly.

Finally, 295 participants: 110 Form 4 female students, 90 parents and 95 teachers were selected purposefully and conveniently to generate quantitative data using questionnaires with the assumption that they were "information rich" and would warrant the most diverse group of participants with similar characteristics. (See Table 1.)

Participants	Type of Participation	Total Participants
5 Key informants (Headteachers)	Interviews (qualitative)	5
50 Teachers (10 from each school)	Questionnaire (quantitative)	50
40 Teachers (8 from each school)	Focused Group Discussion (Qualitative)	40
50 Female students (10 from each school)	Questionnaires (Quantitative)	50
60 Female students (12 from each school)	Focused Group Discussion (Qualitative)	60
50 Parents (10 from each school)	Questionnaire (quantitative)	50
40 Parents (8 from each school)	Focused Group Discussion (Qualitative)	40
Total		295

Table 1   Total Participants: Composition and Research Participation

Data Generation Procedures

In this study, participants were allowed to share their experiences about what inhibits the participation of girls in secondary schools through the use of key informant interviews, survey questionnaires, and FGDs. These tools were selected because they provided quantitative data as well as qualitative data that reflected the actual feelings of the respondents, through the stories and opinions captured directly from the participants themselves. Questionnaires comprising both open-ended questions and closed questions to obtain numerical data as well as qualitative data were used. FGD guidelines assisted participants to generate qualitative data for the study to inform possible reasons that contributed to girls' low participation in education. To determine the effectiveness and

validity of the questionnaires, a pilot test of the questionnaire and FGD was carried out at one of the schools not included in the sample in LRWED. Collected data were used to modify and improve the research tools before actual administration to the sampled population.

Data Analysis

All the data generated from the field were cleaned to identify items that were wrongly responded to, spelling mistakes in the responses, and any blank spaces left unfilled by the respondents. Quantitative data on enrolments, dropout rates, and performance were tabulated to give indications of the trends and impact of the impingements on girls' participation in education. This was done through descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) generated using SPSS. Qualitative data were coded and common issues emerging from the data were clustered. Vignettes emerging from FGDs were identified to support the themes relating to the conceptual framework to provide an understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. The existence of good documentatio

In line with Corbin & Strauss (1990), the first step was open coding the data, an analytic process by which concepts were identified and developed in terms of their properties and dimensions. Individual observations, sentences, ideas, and events were given names and then regrouped into sub-categories which in turn were grouped as categories. The next step was to regroup and link categories to each other in a rational manner. Finally, selectively code-selected a core category and related it to other categories. Findings from questionnaires and FGDs were triangulated and compared with what was in the available literature to find the real cause of the problem. This helped to eliminate bias and detect errors or anomalies in discoveries.

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

This section presents the findings in line with the research questions. The findings fall into three main categories: girls' beliefs about secondary education, underpinning cultural factors that affect girls' education, and other factors affecting girls' education as perceived by parents and teachers.

Girls' Beliefs about Secondary Education in LRWED

The first facet of the study attempted to find out girls' beliefs about secondary education. Ideas were sought from female Form 4 students through FGDs. Results from girls' FGDs revealed that girls held positive beliefs about secondary education. According to Form 4 students, secondary education is a critical stage in life when education foundations are established. It is a time when one decides what they want to be in the future, a time to make the right career choices. One girl explained;

> *As a student, one has dreams and ambitions. In primary school, I used to go to school blindly, but now my eyes are open. I know that secondary education is a guide to one's future career which when lost is very difficult to retrieve. So, I work hard to realize that dream.* (FGD1-Form 4 Female students 11/11/ 2015)

Generally, in line with the Sentiments in the excerpt above, girls held positive beliefs about secondary education. They argued that it helped them to pursue their goals in life, without which it would be impossible. The study shows that girls are ambitious to become nurses, teachers and medical doctors, regardless of the narrow range of career preferences in this rural setting, a common scenario in most rural areas. The lack of range in career preferences could be attributed to a lack of

role models for the girls. On the other hand, only a small percentage of their mothers work outside the home.

Despite many of the girls generally holding a positive view about secondary education, results from girls' FGDs also revealed that some of the girls held negative beliefs about secondary education. Participants explained that some girls failed to participate fully in education due to challenges they face in life including love affairs, lack of school needs, long distance to school, and peer pressure. Sometimes girls make wrong choices due to problems they face in life. Essentially, choices can destroy their future prospects in the absence of proper guidance and counseling. According to the girls, concentrating in class sometimes became a problem. One girl elaborated on the challenge:

> *I do not want to embarrass myself in front of my boyfriend after giving a wrong answer. Besides, boys mock us when we get a question wrong calling us all sorts of names capitalizing on our academic weaknesses and appearance calling us 'nkhwangwa' meaning ax, a word for a girl without good looks. That makes us feel bad and we stop raising our hands in class* (FGD1-Form 4 Female students – 11/11/ 2015)

Such sentiments revealed that female students felt culturally out of place as they failed to compete with boys or defend themselves when boys attack them. This is a sign that school-based gender-based violence exists in LRWED, a scenario that calls for immediate action. While education requires a competitive and aggressive spirit for one to excel, most girls lacked this spirit since culture has taught them to be loyal always these patriarchal societies like LRWED which hinders their education participation.

Key Sociocultural Factors Affecting Girls' Education

This section of the paper addresses the second research objective to re-examine which sociocultural factors affected the participation of girls in education and identify the underpinning problems. Findings highlighted that key factors impeding the promotion of girls' education include initiation ceremonies for girls, early or forced marriages, and pregnancies.

Girls' Initiation Ceremonies

First of all, a question was raised to find out how cultural practices and norms impact girls' participation in secondary school education. Figure 1 presents responses from teachers.

Figure 1 shows that the highest proportion of teachers, 100% in Day schools, indicated that initiation ceremonies affected girls' education negatively. Fifty percent (50%) of the teachers in Boarding schools also thought that Chinamwali initiation ceremonies affected girls' education negatively and 42% percent of the teachers indicated that early/forced marriages left a negative effect on girls' education and 8% held other views. From these findings, it may be concluded that generally, the view is that initiation ceremonies have had a huge impact on girls' education in Day secondary schools than in boarding schools, seconded by early or forced marriages in LRWED. The effect of Chinamwali initiation ceremonies is lesser in boarding schools in the presence of boarding facilities.
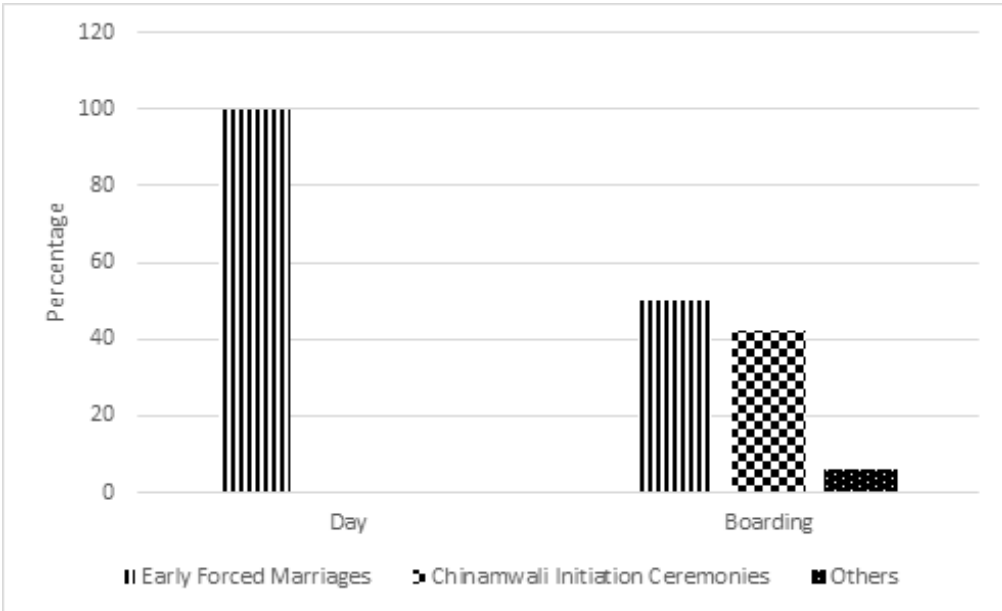
Figure 1: Harmful practices and norms affecting girls' education participation as perceived by teachers

To understand better how girls' initiation ceremonies affect girls' education, the study also explored the dynamics engaged in these practices using FGDs to understand the root causes of the problem. Findings from parent FGDs revealed that there are four types of girls' initiation ceremonies and these are: River initiation, Festive initiation, Indoor initiation, and Christian initiation. According to the parents, the type of initiation a girl attends has the biggest impact on her education.

According to the parents interviewed, River initiations take place as soon as a girl becomes of age where girls are initiated sexually. Girls are mainly provided with adult skills on how to please husbands in bed now that they are old enough. These ceremonies are conducted at the river site where initiates come in groups or individually. The initiates are taught the rules of the game, that is, sex, and go into swearing. The culture of swearing runs so deep in scope that similes are used to describe sexual organs by likening them to different objects to which recruits are told to attach sexual meanings.

These descriptions decorate and celebrate sex beautifully for the young girls making it inevitable for them to experiment once they go out of the camp as one parent articulated:
> *Swearing is their core value. It shows that you are now an expert in the field. Girls are shown graphic scenes of sex displayed by adults. They are given a concoction to make them feel high and fearless for any sexual assignment regardless of the age of the male client.* (FGD3- Parents -12/11/15)

The excerpts above illustrate the poor practices that are taken as acceptable in the community but are detrimental to girls' education. Parents elaborated that most girls who went through this type

of initiation rarely remained in school because they were ready to practice what they were taught. According to girls, their counterparts still did it because it is taken as an elevation in status so most girls proudly do it to avoid being laughed at by their peers. Uninitiated girls are called 'Okontho', in vernacular meaning 'those who do not know.' Therefore, better ways of counseling girls need to be explored to help them remain in school.

Festive initiation ceremonies, according to parents, are conducted once in a while, especially during festive times to remember a dead chief, a village elder, or during the installation of a new chief. Initiates usually camp at a graveyard which is the masquerade headquarters/camp. Parents added that at these festivities, girls are captured with or without parental or personal consent just to spice up the occasion. Initiates are counseled in the same way as their counterparts at the river initiation ceremonies emphasizing sex and swearing.

Furthermore, the findings reveal that festive initiation also brought about some form of Gender-Based Violence (GBV). Men use girls as objects to please their selfish appetites. One teacher lamented as follows:

> It was in 2014 when a very smart Form 2 girl was caught by a masquerade on her way from school. She was detained for 3 days at the graveyard, gang-raped, and initiated by force. The initiation is the raping itself. Since then, her performance took a downward spiral and she soon disappeared from my classroom and never came back. Other rumors had it that she had fallen pregnant. It was later discovered that she got married. Nobody followed up on her. (FGD2-Teachers -16/11/15)

According to teacher FGD participants, when a masquerade dancer chases and overpowers a girl, she is detained in the graveyard and kept there for days or even a week. While there, she is initiated by being gang-raped and is taught how to swear and read masquerade signs to subscribe to their belief which is called buying the way. Thus, once she goes through this she becomes one of them and is never chased again.

Indoor initiation, according to parents, takes place within the confinements of a house. It is mostly preferred by parents, who dislike river initiations, but the type of counseling provided is the same except for the setting. Girls remain in the house for a whole week without going out; going through all rituals like their friends at the river site.

According to the parents FGD participants, the final type of initiation called Christian initiation was influenced by secular initiations. In the first place, converted parents did not want their daughters to undergo secular initiation which violated their newly found Christian beliefs. In this type of initiation, girls are counseled separately from boys. Initiates are normally taught life skills that help as they grow up. They do not highlight sexual skills like in secular initiation ceremonies. This is done before their baptism in the church. They usually take 2 or 3 days at a church camp. One parent shared her own experience:

> I also went through Christian initiation. There is no swearing and no stupid things passed to children, only precepts from the Bible. They encourage good behavior, personal care, a life of prayer, and sexual purity. They warned us that if we play with boys, menstruation will cease and the tummy will swell and we will eventually die, giving us misleading information on pregnancy. (FGD 3- Parents -18/11/15)

The commonly held view in parents' FGDs was that sexual initiation practices are detrimental to girls' education because elders tend to go too deep in scope when advising tender boys and girls without considering their age which systematically discourages them from exercising their right to education and rather they start valuing sex more than education.

Early Marriages and Forced Marriages

The study also sought to find out if parents force their girls into marriage in LRWED. Parents' responses are shown in Figure 2 below.
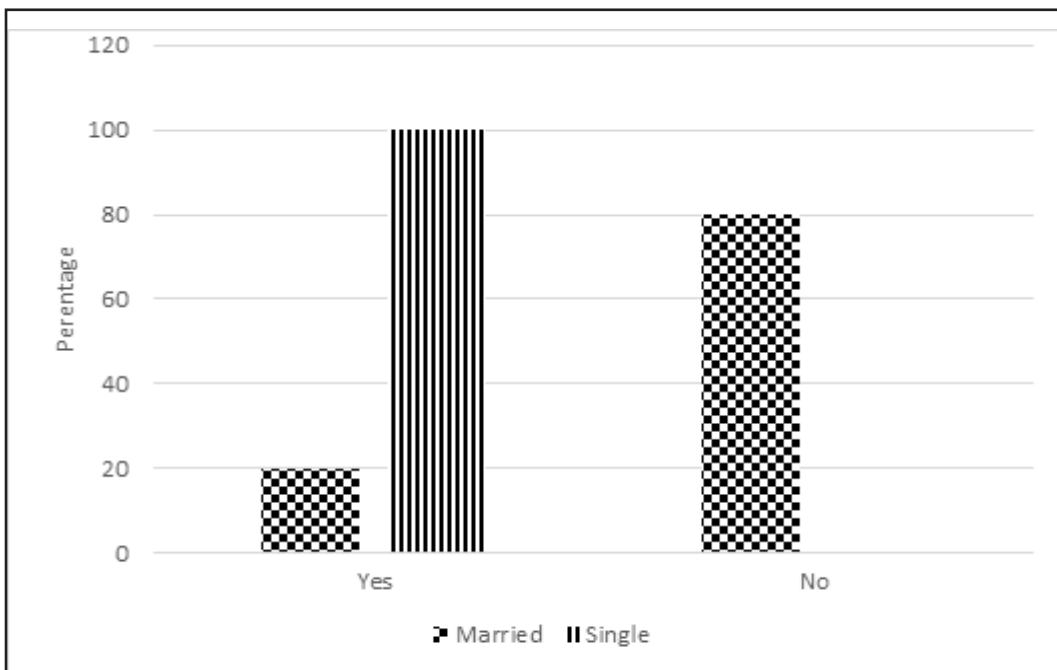

Figure 2: Response on whether parents force girls into marriage

In Figure 2 findings show that single mothers had the highest score of 100% as being those that usually send their daughters up for marriage. However, unlike single mothers, 80% of the married women indicated that they do not give their daughters into marriage. This probably means the single mothers face several challenges and may give away their daughters in anticipation of support from the girl when she is married. The married women, after experiencing marital challenges probably discouraged their girls from rushing into marriage. In addition to the above findings, it was also stated that some parents force girls into marriages due to illiteracy. A female participant explained more about this:

> *Most people who give their daughters away are illiterate. They haven't been to school and they don't know its importance. Their parents taught them that when a girl-child is mature, she must get married. To them, it is no big deal to marry off a daughter. Instances of giving*

*in girls as young as 10 as payments for village bank loans to creditors are common today.
Very few parents seem to know the importance of education.* (FGD3 -Parents–16/11-/15)

The excerpt is a true revelation of the huge problems girls go through in LRWED which means that more policies to help girls remain in school are needed.

Other Reasons Girls Dropout of School

Another question was asked to teachers to find out why girls drop out of secondary school. Teacher responses are given in Figure 3.
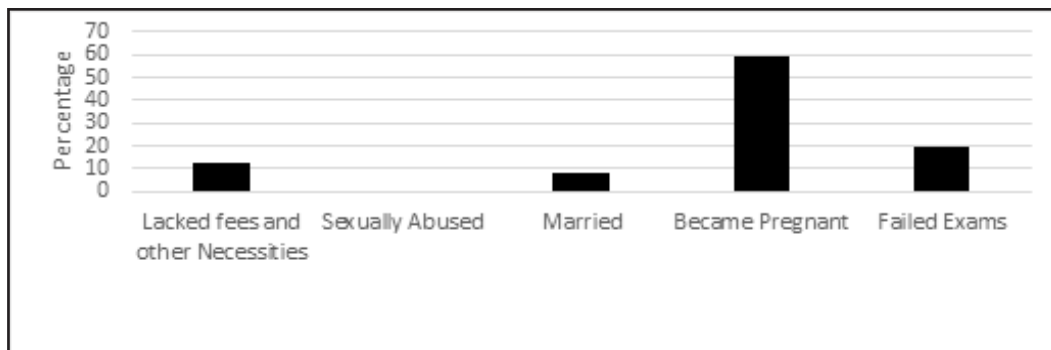

Figure 3: Boarding School Teachers' perspectives on the reasons girls drop out of school

As shown in Figure 3, pregnancy is the key factor affecting girls' education (57% in the sampled schools). Other factors impacting girls drop out of school include exam failure (21%), lack of school fees and other personal effects (14%), marriage (7%) and sexual abuse (0%). This means that pregnancy is the major cause of girls' dropout. However, the situation has changed over the years since no incident of sexual abuse was reported in the area, which is commendable.

Another question was posed to parents to find out other factors affecting girls' participation in education in the selected schools. Figure 4 below shows their responses.

Figure 4, indicates that poverty is a major factor affecting girls' participation in school at 100% for separated parents and 57% for single parents and 62% for married parents. Other factors mentioned were business activities, farming activities, and the closeness of schools to markets.
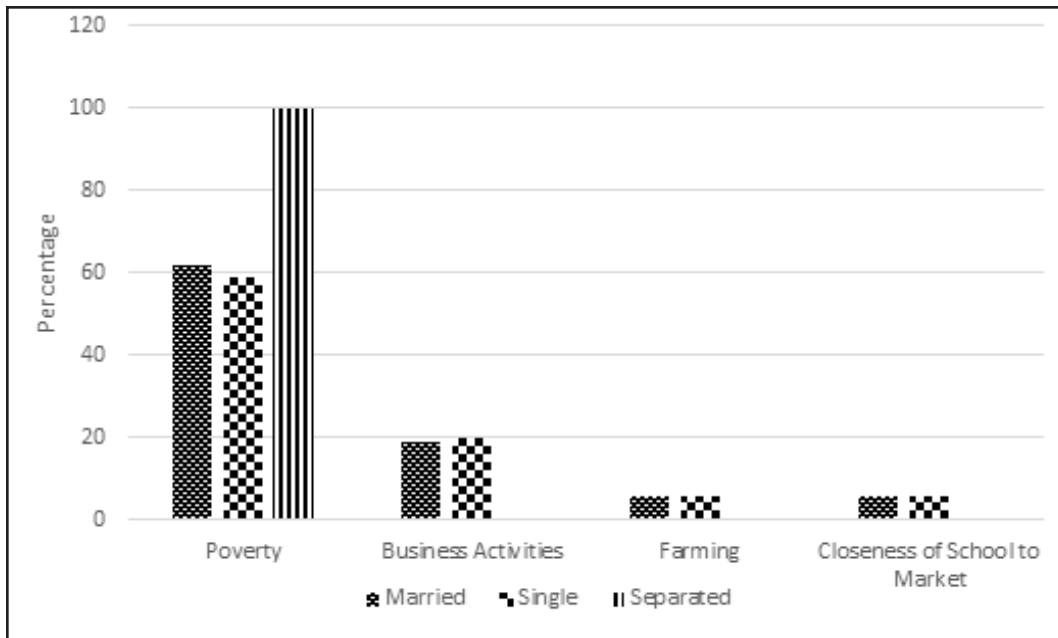
Figure 4: Parents' perspectives on factors affecting participation of girls in education

Similarly, findings from FGDs agreed with the girls' responses. The girls explained that most of them come from very poor families and are easily lured into love relationships to get assistance from the males. For example, road contractors with money were a big asset to most girls. These men offered to do anything for these girls even paying their school fees. However, these relationships do not fully address their problems as they ended up landing into complex problems including pregnancies and sexually transmitted illnesses (STIs). When asked why this is the case when MoEST provides bursaries for needy students, the girls explained the limitations when it comes to bursaries:

> *Very few people qualify for bursaries due to conditions attached. One might have parents who are peasant farmers, but MoEST wants only orphans. For example, some of our friends left. They failed to pay school fees and find other educational and personal needs because their parents are very poor. It is not easy because things are very expensive these days.* (FGD2 – Form 4 female students -11/11/15)

According to teachers, girls became easy prey for men who flash money at them in exchange for sex, decisions they later regret. One teacher participant at a boarding secondary school articulated this well:

> *Between girls and boys, girls frequently get excuses to leave the campus to meet their sugar daddies and they don't feel obligated to follow school rules. Others are encouraged by their families to leave school dormitories and rent cheap, but dilapidated accommodation with no security. Understandably K725, 000.00 ($54) school fees per term were too much*

for very poor families. But some girls took advantage of this and decided to live in rented houses where they were free to see men who gave them money to make ends meet. (FGD2-Teachers -12/11/15)

Evidently, when girls are desperate for money, they do anything which affects their performance. They also easily drop out of school because of its delayed returns.

DISCUSSION

The study aimed at exploring underlining cultural factors impeding girls' education in LRWED. On the premise of the literature reviewed, many girls experience difficulties to access, participating and completing their secondary education. Therefore, the study sought to establish the level of interest students have in education in LRWED, and thereafter determine the cultural and other factors affecting girls' education. The findings revealed four key issues which will be the focus of discussion in this section.

To begin with, findings revealed that a greater proportion of girls have a positive mind about secondary education and believe that education can help them in dealing with a myriad of challenges they face. The girls believe they can achieve their aspirations in life through education. This implies that many girls in LRWED schools would complete their education if provided with a conducive environment and protection. This aligns with the aspirations of the UN articulated in the declarations and conventions to protect and help girls achieve their educational goals. Through the Child Rights-Based Approach to girls' education, girls therefore ought to be empowered to participate fully in education. Despite the positive view towards education among girls, the revelation that some girls still do not consider education as an instrument that can help deal with their problems and rather opt for marriage needs to be taken seriously. As will be discussed later, the cultural relativist position encourages embracing cultural practices (Parisi, 2017) hence this could be a cultural effect.

Furthermore, the study's findings agree with other studies (Chimombo, 2000; Hyde & Kadzamira, 1994; Msamati, 2013; Plant International, 2012) that cultural practices hinder girls' education. Even in LRWED, initiation ceremonies and early marriages remain key factors that hinder girls' education. Furthermore, poverty and illiteracy of parents are also mentioned as underlining factors that influence girls to turn to early marriages and pregnancies. Parents tend to focus on resources (money) they could get from marrying off their girl child to pay their debts and single mothers are at the forefront of this practice. A study by Plan Malawi in 2012, also established that generally in Malawi parents run away from their responsibility by marrying off children without considering their age. The same study elaborated that some parents marry off young girls to pay off village loans and society watches. Muyengwa (2014) also found that early marriages affected education as young girls continued to suffer from emotional, physical, and psychological abuse which can be classified as statutory rape. Early marriages lead to increased vulnerability with the added responsibility of looking after the family. Most parents also took marriage as a norm without considering the age of the girl. The practice of parents forcing girls into marriage as in the context of this study also signifies that women take it as a norm. This aligns with the cultural feminism perspective which emphasizes the roles that women play in society. Hence, a girls' marriage in this case is a norm that is highly valued. Such acceptances unnecessarily stand in the way of girls' education. This shows that the child rights-based approach to the promotion of girls' education

which aims at assisting girls to develop their full potential and participate in education freely is still far from attainment (Das, 2010; UN, 1989).

The evidence from this study illustrates that initiation ceremonies and early marriages are inextricably related in that the former could fuel the latter. As can be observed from the deep narratives on the type of knowledge transmitted in the initiation ceremonies, such knowledge can encourage premarital sexual activities that can end up in early marriages. Pregnancies leading to early marriages could be the consequences of the knowledge that is provided in the initiation ceremonies. Girls that are forced to 'swear' that they are now grown up to have sex with any man and taught how to please men in bed are enticed to have sex instead of concentrating on their education. Girls cannot participate fully in their educational endeavors in such an environment. The practice is harmful in that it negatively affects the lives of girls and is at odds with the universal declaration against harmful social and cultural practices that impede the best interests of a child. Save the Children (2005) argued that cultural norms, beliefs, and practices constrain girls' education; especially in developing countries since societies value tradition which constrain girls from making their own decisions and expressing their own opinions, affecting girls' participation in education in the long term. The girls in this current study could not express themselves but were forced to believe in society's norms. Thus, these cultural practices as observed by Davison & Kanyuka (1990) only prepare girls to be good housekeepers and mothers and do not guide them in future career prospects which is retrogressive.

Therefore, the cultural relativist approach to human rights could be playing out itself here where we see women leading the initiation ceremonies and selecting what type of human rights to follow. They are not paying attention to human rights that advance girls' education by choosing to practice initiation ceremonies that might harm girls and deter them from education (Paris, 2017). Probably women counselors in LRWED do not believe or fully understand that human rights are inalienable and this is impeding girls' education. As the findings of this study indicate, illiteracy could also be fueling the neglect of children's human rights by women. In fact, the practice might be rooted to an extent because some girls sometimes feel elevated in status after initiation as this is the perception promoted by the women. Girls may want to align themselves with the perception shared by the majority of women in line with their culture and probably feel satisfied as evidenced by a few girls who indicated that they do not find education to be effective.

The study also revealed that there is a knowledge gap existing between sex education being provided to the girls in government schools to that being provided to girls in the initiation ceremonies. Probably the government curriculum on sex education is lacking some information that the women counselors find important. As noted in the views of the participants of the study, some suggested that the counselors should also emphasize the importance of education in the advice given to girls in initiation camps to help girls remain in school. This demonstrates a disjuncture in the knowledge being provided in government schools and initiation ceremonies. LRWED secondary school girls would be in dilemma as to what type of knowledge to subscribe to. They will have to be convinced of the benefits of sex education provided by the government likewise that provided in the initiation ceremony and let them make an informed decision.

Finally, the findings in this study suggest that although appropriate laws exist, they are both non-consequential and ineffective as they seem not to adequately guard or deter children from early

marriages. It is also apparent that children do not obtain the required protection given the fact that some of their parents push for early marriages to acquire wealth. Such a view is also supported by the literature (Malawi Human Rights Commission, 2007; UNICEF 2005). The government together with the parents has the responsibility of protecting a girl child through the implementation of these policies. The Malawi Education Act, Malawi National Education Policy, and the National Education Sector Investment Plan are among key policy documents outlining key actions to be carried out in enhancing girls' education. The human rights declaration and conventions ought to be taken to the private sphere of family life, sensitizing girls on their rights to meet their aspirations.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION FOR PLANNERS

The aim of the study was to explore underlining cultural factors impeding girls' education in LRWED. The persisting inequality between girls and boys in access and advancement in their secondary education prompted this study. While the available literature indicates sociocultural factors as key factors that impede girls' education and this study sought to re-examine in more depth whether this applies to LRWED specifically. The study improved understanding of the underlining cultural factors impeding the participation of girls in education. In line with the study's first objectives, findings revealed that girls are zealous about education in LRWED and this implies that providing good conditions and protection for the girls would help them attain their goals. Thus, enabling girls to fully participate in their education is investing in their future progress and better standards of their life with multiplier effects.

Cultural practices like initiation ceremonies continue to be the main impediment to girls' education. The deep narratives on how knowledge is transmitted in the initiation ceremonies expose a gap in knowledge between what public schools provide in terms of sex education versus the sex education the girls acquire through the initiation ceremonies. The knowledge provided in the initiation ceremonies while helpful in some sense, also promotes premarital sex thereby hindering girls' participation in education. Given the difficult circumstances girls face as manifested in the study findings, it is not surprising to see girls' education participation in the study area falls in the lower quantile. If girls could be assisted to exercise their educational rights advanced by Child Rights Approach, they would reap the benefits of secondary education and their ambitions would come to pass. Low girls' participation in secondary education in LRWED can therefore be attributed to underpinning initiation conversations that include the required knowledge as perceived by the parents.

This study's findings have implications in terms of informing gender mainstreaming of educational policy and planning provisions that will improve girls' secondary education participation in the study area. This understanding would be used as a benchmark from which to start new actions to remove the specific underpinning cultural practices by engaging all stakeholders at the family, community, and school levels. Only when societies learn to appreciate girls' educational rights, and what sexual knowledge to be provided to girls would it help girls to participate fully in secondary education just like boys. Therefore, we expect the outcomes of this study to encourage educational planners to help families, communities, and schools to prioritize girls' education.

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