

# Responding to the needs of the community: Examining the educational opportunities for girls in rural Malawi

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*This paper reports on the findings of the preliminary research that I conducted in two districts of southern Malawi, Africa. The purpose of the research was to establish the existence of the Sara Communication Initiative (SCI), a girls' intervention program, which had been introduced to selected rural schools. During the preliminary visits, I interviewed head teachers, teachers, pupils and parents. The major issues identified were: that girls were overworked at home compared to boys; that girls were sometimes denied parental care and protection after puberty; that girls in most rural schools lacked female role models; that some girls failed to continue schooling due to poverty; and that some girls failed to enrol in school due to long distances. The situation suggests that more needs to be done for the advancement of the education of rural girls.*

Rural schools, female role models, girls' education, UNICEF-ESARO, Malawi, Africa

## INTRODUCTION

Malawi is a developing country located in South Eastern Africa, bordered by Tanzania to the north, Zambia to the west, and Mozambique to the east and south. According to UNICEF (1996), Malawi is one of the poorest countries, "has a population of over ten million with a per capita income of US\$200 and a high under-five mortality rate" (as cited in Hemenway, 1996, p.1). Volunteer Service Overseas (2001) reported that 87 per cent of Malawi's population lived in rural areas and that nearly 90 per cent of the rural population were smallholder farmers with few productive assets, were poorly educated, malnourished, and in poor health. Among the disadvantaged groups in the rural areas were the female-headed households that accounted for 30 per cent of the rural population (Hemenway, 1996, pp.1-2). When women were in charge of households, they were responsible to provide for both the emotional and material needs of their families. More challenges were experienced in single parent families when they had to raise young children because they demanded mothers' time more than older children did.

Students in Malawi studied in difficult conditions. It was evident that work and household responsibilities competed with study time. In order to graduate from primary school, students had to complete eight grade levels. Less than half of all primary students reached the fifth level of primary school. As in many developing and low-income countries where resources were scarce, girls were at a greater educational disadvantage.

In this article, I discuss, first, the background to my interest in rural education. Secondly, I analyse the problems that are experienced by students in the rural areas of Malawi in general. Thirdly, I examine the challenges that are experienced by girls in rural schools in particular. Fourthly, I outline the interventions that the Malawi government, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and donor agencies are making available for girls to enable them attain basic education.

Finally, I explore the alternatives that can be implemented to address the challenges that girls face in rural schools of Malawi.

### **BACKGROUND TO MY INTEREST IN RURAL EDUCATION**

My interest in rural education issues was stimulated when I worked as a teacher and later a teacher supervisor in Malawi. When I made a trip to Malawi to conduct preliminary research for my Thesis and Dissertation requirements, my interest in rural education was rekindled. The research topic focused on the study of the impact of the Sara Communication Initiative (SCI), *The Special Gift*, in the selected schools of two districts in Southern Malawi. *The Special Gift* is the first of a series of SCI comic books produced by United Nations Children's Education Fund-Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Organisation (UNICEF-ESARO).

The episode depicted the adventures of Sara, an adolescent girl who was becoming a role model and a symbol of girls' empowerment in Africa. UNICEF-ESARO (1996) stated, "The story concerns 'push out' from school and heavy workload girls endure at home" (intro. page). During the study, I had the opportunity of visiting nine rural and remote schools in total. I collected data from head teachers, teachers, some pupils, and parents, through informal interviews. The visits revealed that girls faced more difficulties than boys, in their attempt to enrol and stay in school, especially in rural areas.

### **CHALLENGES OF RURAL EDUCATION IN MALAWI**

Among the problems that impeded students' academic progress in general, in Malawi's schools were poverty, poor learning facilities, untrained teachers, discontented teachers, poor infrastructure, inadequate and sometimes unavailability of social services, and negative cultural beliefs and practices. According to the World Bank Project Report 1 (2000), school children in rural Africa were confronted by many challenges in their schooling experiences. Some of the common challenges were cost and location of schools, poverty, attitude about gender, ill health, HIV/ AIDS, and resource inequity (p. 4).

Teachers of rural schools in Malawi in most situations risked their very lives by accepting a teaching position in the particular school communities. When I made preliminary visits to schools that summer, I came across teachers who had poor morale. When I asked them what their experiences were, they indicated that they felt very isolated. Their school was inaccessible during the rainy season. The rural teachers further reported that in order to buy their provisions or to have access to certain social services at the nearest rural town, they had to walk across the river with the water above their waists. Another point that was raised referred to inadequate salaries, which made life hard for the teachers. They felt that their inability to meet some of the basic needs made their life difficult. One teacher commented:

*Because of our low status, some parents do not see the value of education. They comment that if teachers cannot afford even to own a bicycle, then education is not worth much. Parents who look down on teachers might, in some cases, own a few heads of cattle, an ox drawn cart, or a bicycle.*

At the village level, such materials were considered a sign of wealth. If parents persisted in looking down on teachers, then children did not take school seriously either. Sometimes the result was withdrawal from school so that they could work on the field or look after livestock. Another issue, which was raised, was poor infrastructure at most rural schools. Most rural teachers complained that their houses and classrooms were not in good condition. Since teachers were expected to reside close to the schools, they expected to find a good house, which could be rented at minimal cost within the school vicinity. In some instances, teachers had been posted to schools where there were inadequate houses or none at all. In such situations, teachers were expected to find a house outside the school compound. Most teachers considered that a challenge on their part

because the teacher might be charged much higher rent. If the house was far from the school, a teacher might take longer to walk to the school. If one decided to use public transportation, where it was available, it might be very expensive. The teachers that I interviewed indicated that such expenses resulted in tight budgets, making their lives difficult. As well, when teachers rented outside the school, there was fear that they might be vulnerable to outside influences, especially if the village or township was volatile.

In addition to lack of infrastructure was lack of furniture for the schools. As I visited the schools I noticed that some had good classrooms, while others had inadequate classrooms. When I asked how they managed, one teacher stated, "we conduct classes outside, under trees since we have big trees in the school surrounding." Teachers further explained that when it rained, they combined classes in the available space or if it was too congested they sent children home. Also worth noting was that apart from classrooms being inadequate and in some cases dilapidated, some had no desks. The interviewees indicated that they were waiting for the government to provide them. In situations where pupils sat on the floors, teachers were concerned that some of them might drop out because they could not manage to keep their clothes clean. It was also hard for students to sit on a hard floor for the whole day and do their schoolwork.

As we were passing through one community, I noticed that there was generally poor housing, although in some cases I could see a kraal for cattle in the back yard. It was surprising to me because cattle in most cases symbolised wealth in Malawi. When I asked why we could not see decent housing close to the cattle kraals, I was told that sometimes people did not build decent houses on purpose. Although they might be well to do, they preferred to keep low profile because they were afraid of being bewitched. This mentality seemed to have affected some pupils who might decide to leave school before completion because they were afraid of being bewitched by jealous people. Teachers further reiterated that some community members were even scared to dress better than others, because their neighbours might be jealous. Although the challenges I have discussed above impacted on some rural communities, girls had other issues that they had to contend with. The next section discusses the problems that rural girls experience and the impact on their day to day and academic lives.

### **CHALLENGES EXPERIENCED BY GIRLS IN RURAL SCHOOLS**

How were girls more disadvantaged in a rural setting than boys? Girls were a disadvantaged group in rural Malawi because they were considered a source of domestic labour. One teacher commented that boys were more respected than girls in that community. Boys refused to do household chores because they believed it was the women's and girls' responsibility. The teacher further commented, "Some parents referred to their sons as Dad and commanded respect from their sisters and other relatives. Boys, who were treated as special commodity, developed a superior attitude, which became evident even at school". Such boys would not usually bend to school authority. In most Malawian families, boys were believed to be the future of the family or clan, so they were told that the family inheritance belonged to them and not their sisters. The parents believed that daughters would marry into other families, so that providing them with family wealth would not be feasible since they would be under the authority of their husbands. Because boys were expected to be future clan leaders, girls were expected to serve them by, for example, cooking for them and providing bathing water. With reference to work, Ilon (1992) reported that, "in developing countries rural girls spend an average of 30 hours per week on domestic labour" (as cited in Hemenway, 1996, p.2). Girls did more work compared to boys.

Another teacher commented that some students went to school late because they were busy doing household chores such as cooking, drawing water, and working in the garden (hoeing and harvesting). Most girls were also engaged in household activities after school and had no time to read or do assignments. Orphans were usually at a greater disadvantage because they were responsible for most of the household chores. Another teacher reported that sometimes, adoptive

families or guardians also treated orphans harshly. Some left school because they could not meet the demands at home as well as the demands at school.

The second issue pertains to the politics of gender, which is evident in some rural communities where cultural traditions are strong. Apart from the preferential treatment that parents gave boys when allocating household chores, their partiality was also manifested in the way daughters were treated after puberty. At one of the rural schools that I visited, the head teacher disclosed that in that community, when girls reached puberty, parents told them to sleep outside the main house because they had become adults. The girls were advised to find room at a girls' *gowelo*, a hut that was constructed by parents for their girl children. Girls' Attainment in Basic Literacy Education (GABLE) Social Mobilisation Campaign (SMC, 1998, p.33) reported that

the *gowelo* system is based on the traditional belief that if a girl who has begun to menstruate cooks food for her parents and adds salt to it, her father will sicken and die. It is believed that the father faces the same fate if his daughter is pregnant and aborts and he inadvertently eats salt in the food she has prepared.

The major issues being introduced with the *gowelo* system were adulthood, sexual maturity, and anticipated uncleanness. Girls lived separately so that they could use their own utensils and not endanger their fathers. One of the head teachers reported that besides the system's evident discriminatory foundation, the drawback of the *gowelo* system was that girls had extensive freedom. They sometimes went out at night to meet boys. Parents were traditionally not to interfere in the activities of the *gowelo*, though mothers were allowed to inspect the girls occasionally, during the day. The system was disadvantageous to girls who wanted to maintain chastity because they might end up with unplanned pregnancies or HIV/ AIDS.

When boys reached puberty, they were allowed to stay in their parents' house. In some cases a small hut might be built close to the parents' main house if the family decided to do so. Boys continued to be members of the household. They ate what their mothers prepared and slept in the house. If the son was interested in school, he was, in most cases, allowed to continue his education.

The third area of concern in the education of girls in rural Malawi is the lack of female teachers. During my visits to one of the rural schools, I noticed that there were no female teachers at the school. The male teachers were mostly untrained, except the head teacher. The rest were working on their distance education for primary teacher certification, through the Malawi Integrated In-service Teacher Education Program (MIITEP). When I asked the District Education Office representative why there were mostly male teachers in some schools, he stated:

*As a District Education Office, we are mandated to employ teachers from our district in order to fill the quota for untrained teachers. In this case there are more male than female secondary school graduates who can qualify for untrained teaching positions.*

The head teacher of the school commented that due to lack of female role models, the ambition of most girls in that school community might be to get married to a teacher. Teachers in most cases might be the only professional people in a particular community. Girls could not see beyond the school environment because the community was very isolated. The head teacher further reiterated that girls within rural communities would benefit more if there were female role models in the schools. The Gender Appropriate Curriculum (GAC, 1997, p.34) suggested that it was appropriate for students to have role models who could demonstrate competence, self-esteem, success, respect, and other successful ways of conducting their lives. Boughton (1980, p.14) also stated that "mentors can be supportive teachers or career models, particularly in such non-traditional fields as mathematics or science, where young women need to know their career options". The presence of female teachers in schools might enable girls to be aware of the options that they had in life. As well, parents would send daughters to school knowing there were female guardians.

A finding at one school revealed the case of a girl who was in Standard 7 (the equivalent of Grade 7). The girl loved school, but was the only female in the class of 22 pupils. In addition, there was no female teacher at the school. She became disappointed and left school for almost two months. While she was still at home, the girls' intervention program, *Sara Communication Initiative* (SCI) was introduced to the school community prior to my visit. Her friends told the girl about the intervention program and she decided to go back to school. When I asked her what had happened, she stated:

*I decided to leave school because continuing my education could not help me because I was the only girl in my class and we had no female teacher in the school. Even if I worked hard with the hope of being selected to attend secondary school, I could not go because my parents do not have the money for school fees.*

I encouraged her to stay in school because school enlightens us to some extent, even though we might not go as far as some people. I encouraged her to stay in school and achieve what she was able to.

On the issue of role modelling, if there were more female teachers in rural schools, most girls might not be influenced by some of the negative cultural beliefs and practices. Some of the cultural beliefs that one teacher shared were, for example, that girls were encouraged to marry early, because if they could not reproduce before the age of 20 years, they would not be able to reproduce at a later stage in life. Coupled with the issue of reproducing early, some parents preferred to give their daughters in marriage in exchange for the bride price.

The fourth problem that students in most rural schools in Malawi experience is poverty. In most households, when mothers were pressured to provide for their families, it was the girls who assisted. In most female-headed households in rural areas, daughters were expected to deputise for their mothers and to provide for some of the needs of the family. At one of the rural schools that was situated close to the Lake, I was told that parents sent their daughters to the lake to exchange firewood for fresh fish. Parents sent girl children to buy fish at sunset, because fishermen began selling fish at night. The head teacher further explained that for most girls, the frequent trips to the lake resulted in unwanted pregnancies and early marriages with the fishermen.

On the same issue of poverty, most head teachers indicated that girls would in some cases leave school because they did not have decent clothes to wear to school. Especially when girls reached adolescence, they were very self-conscious to be presentable. In addition, adolescent girls might not have proper sanitary materials that would ensure their comfort at school.

The interviewees in most schools also reiterated that the issue of poverty was evident when it was time for primary school leavers to go to secondary school. Usually, parents would not have the money to send their children to school. Money for school fees or other necessities like toiletries and transport could not be available. In the case of one school that I visited, the students could still not benefit from the community day secondary school across the river. Although it might have been cheaper to attend a day school compared to boarding, they had no access to the school because there was no bridge connecting that community to the other side. When the river was swollen during the rainy season, no one could cross. Another alternative would have been for the parents to make arrangements for their children to stay with relatives on the other side of the river. Unfortunately, although 24 out of 25 students had passed the Standard Eight Primary School Leaving Examinations, they could not go because they had no relatives who could keep them.

Finally, long distances discourage parents from sending their daughters to school. In order to encourage more girls to go to school, the Malawi government in collaboration with donor agencies and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), established community junior primary

schools (Standards 1 to 4) that were located close to feeder villages. While that investment encouraged girls to attend school, there was still a problem for girls who wanted to proceed to higher levels of primary because they had to walk long distances to school. One head teacher of a junior primary school stated “parents do not send their daughters to school because they fear that the girls might be enticed by boys and men on the way”. The teacher further commented that, although the girls might resist male advances for some time, parents feared that their daughters might give in to the pressure at some point, ending their schooling experience.

A research study by Wynd (1999) echoed the concerns of rural parents regarding their daughters’ safety. Parents wanted to be sure their daughters were safe from abductions and sexual harassment. In addition, although the parents were supportive of girls’ education, they also expected daughters to help their mothers carry out the never-ending household chores. Mothers also wanted to ensure the chastity of their daughters so that they could marry properly. Girls who got pregnant out of wedlock were a burden to the already impoverished rural households. It was the hope of parents and teachers, that some day, community junior primary schools in rural Malawi, would be upgraded to full primary school status so that girls could complete their primary education safely.

### **SOLUTIONS TO PROBLEMS RURAL COMMUNITIES IN MALAWI**

In order to address the issues of gender inequality at home, school, and the communities at large, the Malawi Government in collaboration with the NGOs came up with programs that were intended to intervene the existing practices and challenges of the education system. Hemenway (1996, p.3) stated that “international aid policymaking bodies such as UNESCO and UNICEF have adopted policies in their development strategies promoting increased basic education for girls and increased attention to women’s education”. The proposed approaches for the girl child initiatives being carried out in Malawi are based on the Global Platform for Action and the Beijing declaration, which stated:

Education is a human right and an essential tool for achieving the goals of equality, development, and peace. Non-discriminatory education benefits both girls and boys and this ultimately contributes to more equal relationships between women and men. Equality of access to and attainment of educational qualifications is necessary if more women are to become agents of change. (Malawi Gender Policy, 2001, p.1)

Among the interventions that the government has put in place are: (a) Free Primary Education (FPE); (b) Girls Attainment in basic Literacy Education (GABLE) program; (c) encouraging girls who left school due to pregnancy to go back; (d) encouraging girls and women to pursue science and technology courses; (e) revising school curricula to make it more gender responsive; (f) incorporating gender discussions during workshops, seminars, and training courses for educators; and (g) bringing to the spotlight careers of exemplary Malawian women (Malawi Gender Policy, 2001, p. 1).

Though the efforts outlined above have been workable in some schools, there is need for more incentives in rural areas. In order to ensure appreciation of role models, the schools need to have female teachers with whom girls can interact. Though there may be female employees from other government departments working close to the schools, such as agriculture, health, and forestry, they may not have the impact on female pupils that teachers can. Robb (1998, p.2) observed that, “due to the unique conditions in Malawi, there needed to be less reliance on media and more reliance on social interaction”. The number of female teachers in the rural areas needed to be equated with adequate representation of female supervisors at the rural District Education Offices, which I found insufficient in the two district education offices that I visited.

One alternative for the rural schools is to provide good facilities for teaching and learning. In most communities, schools were considered centres of village activities. In order to attract parents and children, the schools need to be appealing by providing good and adequate infrastructure, furniture, textbooks, notebooks, writing materials, and qualified teachers. Highly qualified teachers were not easy to recruit for rural areas because they knew their contributions might be undervalued. They went where work conditions were better, given the choice. In order to attract teachers, government should ensure availability of decent teachers' houses, good roads that led to the main highways, and medical facilities, markets, and other social services were available. It was disturbing to see the isolation that some of the teachers experienced. Untrained teachers often tried their best to transfer from the remote areas as soon as they completed their formal training.

Another incentive that may be beneficial to enhancing the education of females in rural areas is providing economic assistance to needy families through scholarships for girls who need to go to school away from home. Organisations that have been mandated with the improvement of education need to increase the participation of parents, students, and communities in school governance and decision-making at local levels. They must also enhance adult education to meet the needs of rural and older students can also benefit rural communities. According to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Report in Brief (1998, p.2), in order to encourage girls to enrol in school and to stay up to completion, there is need for a partnership between the Government, the private sector, and the community. In Malawi, the traditional structures are already in place and initiators of change can easily partner with rural communities who have already an agenda for development. An important issue here is that women need to be at the forefront of the program and projects that are taken into the rural areas so that they can impact other women and girls. As well, the issues of development are in their interest.

## CONCLUSIONS

Although the Malawi Government, donor agencies, and NGOs have the resources to bring gender issues into the public arena, the success of the implementation of the plans depend on the willingness of the pupils, parents, teachers, and communities at large to change their attitudes. At the local level, parents need to be more supportive of innovations if there is adequate economic investment. Financial aid in the form of employment or subsidies for farming materials can relieve parents of their basic needs, therefore releasing girls to go to school. Girls must not be encouraged to marry at a very young age. As well, the assurance that their daughters are likely to be safe and that their education may be beneficial can encourage parents to be positive about girls' education.

A crucial aspect of rural education advancement is the monitoring and supervision of the intervention programs that are put in place. In Malawi's primary education system, there are zone supervisors who are each responsible for a number of schools. The supervisors have motorcycles for their transportation. One of the drawbacks is that usually, supervisors do not have adequate funding for fuel. This situation limits their movements, thus constraining their efficiency. During my school visits in Malawi, I became convinced that there is need to visit teachers in rural areas more often in order to boost their morale. If they are not supervised often, they become despondent, and therefore, tend to perform poorly.

In Malawi, most people acknowledge that education leads to a better life. Though there have been constraints in the education of girls, especially in the rural areas due to socio-economic and cultural challenges, some parents are responding positively to the sensitisation programs that are in place. In order to ensure the positive influence of most of the programs, educators, policymakers, traditional leaders, NGOs, and donor agencies must continue to discuss ways of addressing the socio-economic and cultural obstacles that are hindering progress. Collaborative approaches are likely to ensure advancement in the education of girls.

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