



**USAID**  
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

# WORKING PAPER



Educational Quality Improvement Program  
Policy • Systems • Management

## Strengthening Gender and Education Programming in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

### Introduction

There is widespread international agreement about the positive effects of female education on measures of individual and family health and wellbeing. According to Save the Children in *State of the World's Mothers 2005: The Power and Promise of Girls' Education*, educated girls and women marry and initiate sex later, have lower maternal and infant mortality rates, have fewer and healthier children, have greater earning capacity, are more likely to participate in political activities, are less likely to be HIV-positive, and are more likely to send their own children to school. One additional year of education reduces childbearing by 0.3 to 0.5 children per woman, and educated women are half as likely to have a child that dies before age five.

These data have led to increased international focus on girls' education, particularly since 1990. In 2000, the Millennium Development Goals and Dakar Education for All (EFA) framework pledged to reduce the international gender gap by 2005 and eliminate it by 2015. Despite significant gains, girls' enrollment, completion, and achievement gaps remain. In fact, according to Save the Children in "Achieving the Gender Parity Millennium Development Goal: What Needs to Be Done," the worldwide literacy gender gap increased between 1990 and 2000. There are currently about 58 million out-of-school girls, compared to 45 million boys, and only 76 percent of girls complete primary school, compared to 85 percent of boys. Missing the gender equality targets negatively affects EFA, child health and nutrition, and democratization efforts.

This EQUIP2 Working Paper explores the current status of gender equity in education by examining the USAID-funded Girls' Attainment in Basic Literacy and Education (GABLE) project in Malawi from 1991 to 2003. GABLE was one of the earliest and most successful efforts to promote a gender parity approach to girls' education. This study describes some of the project's positive outcomes and unintended consequences and argues that, in countries like Malawi, gains in gender parity can be sustained and increased with gender-focused equity models that employ collaborative policy practices.

### Gender Parity vs. Gender Equity

Education development efforts that address gender differences generally take the form of female-focused, top-down activities to improve gender parity. While some of these efforts have increased parity in enrollment rates and, in fewer cases, retention, completion, and achievement rates, there have been unintended consequences and failures.



Gender equity approaches address the social, cultural, political, and economic forces that affect girls' and boys' educational experiences. This method is more complex to design, implement, and evaluate from a donor or national government perspective than gender parity programs. Gender equity suggests the possibility of radical educational and social transformation by identifying and transforming inequities in children's daily education experiences. These models offer a more ambitious promise of sustainability because they implicitly require local ownership of analysis and solutions. Gender parity in education is a probable but not inevitable outcome of gender equity.

### Case History: Malawi

Malawi, one of the world's poorest countries, began an ambitious girls' education program in the early 1990s. Partnerships between local women leaders, the government, international donors, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) led to actions ranging from the funding of an ambitious girls' education project to changes in policies governing pregnant girls' rights to schooling and the introduction of model girl-friendly schools. Malawi is regularly heralded as one of the key girls' education success stories, both because of its broad government and international support and because of the significant reduction in the enrollment gender gap.

The Malawi case embodies many of the conditions believed to lead to improved girls' education: funding for multifaceted girls' education programming, participatory project designs, and government, community, and international support. Between 1990 and 2000, these efforts largely achieved their intended outcomes of a decreased gender enrollment gap and a primary school gender ratio narrowed from 0.84 to 0.98.

While girls' education efforts helped enroll a higher proportion of girls in school, the programs did not respond to larger education issues and failed to retain female students in school. During the 1990s, Malawi's education system suffered from declines in quality, continued population growth and refugee activity, and the effects of HIV/AIDS. Despite increased gender parity rates, Malawi made little progress in overall girls' education between 1990 and 2000. The ratio of girls' enrollment to boys' is now more equal, but girls are less likely to be educated than in 1990, and Malawi's national completion rate to grade five dropped 40 percent during the 1990s, according to Save the Children in *State of the World's Mothers 2005: The Power and Promise of Girls' Education*.

### Background

Thanks to a consortium of concerned women leaders, donors, and government officials that formed in the late 1980s, efforts to improve girls' education began early in Malawi. At the time, enrollment, retention, and completion rates at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels were among the world's lowest, and there were significant regional and gender inequalities. Data from 1986 showed:

- A 70 percent general pass rate on the Primary School Leaving Exam and a rate of 62 percent for girls;

- A 48 percent net primary enrollment rate in grade one and a rate of 47 percent for girls;
- That 36 percent of all students and 30 percent of girls reached eighth grade; and
- That enrollment rates at the secondary and tertiary levels were under 8 and 2 percent, respectively—gender gaps in secondary and tertiary education were even greater than at the primary level.

By signing the EFA declaration in 1990, the government of Malawi provided impetus and rationale for undertaking activities with international donors to improve gender parity. As in most countries, these efforts focused on increasing girls’ access to formal primary schools. Between 1990 and 1994, government activities included:

- Increasing educational spending, particularly on basic education;
- Removing primary school fees one year at a time;
- Reserving one-third of all places in coed secondary schools for females;
- Rescinding the uniform requirement to encourage children from poor families to attend;
- Appointing a female Minister of Education; and
- Changing the pregnancy policy to allow new mothers to return to school.

International donors increased funding for educational infrastructure, teacher training, education planning, and curricular reform while NGOs provided female-friendly school models in pilot districts.

### ***The GABLE Project***

GABLE is considered one of the most successful girls’ education development projects of the past decade. An effort to create widespread and sustainable social and institutional support for girls’ education, the project acknowledged that girls faced greater constraints to education than boys and targeted decision-makers at various levels. Education reform was limited to efforts to more equally incorporate girls into the existing system, rather than sponsor new programs or offerings. GABLE’s multi-level, multi-pronged gender parity approach included:

- Scholarships for non-repeating secondary school girls;
- A community mobilization campaign;
- Policy advocacy at the national level;
- A series of media materials about appropriate role models for girls; and
- Support for a gender-appropriate-curriculum position in the Ministry of Education/ Malawi Institute of Education.

### ***GABLE and Free Primary Education (FPE)***

Due primarily to staffing and governance issues, GABLE gained launched as Malawi underwent a political, economic, and social transformation. In 1994, a 30-year dictatorship ended and was replaced by a multiparty democratic system. The new government liberalized the economy, rescinded laws that restricted personal freedoms,



and immediately declared Free Primary Education (FPE). Primary enrollment rates increased by over one-third in six months, and FPE came to embody the promise of democracy.

Prior to democratization, Malawi's elitist education system was of relatively high quality. Parents paid school fees at the primary level, which restricted access. Students who completed secondary school were extremely likely to gain employment in the formal labor force, often as civil servants.

Despite its high levels of quality, the Malawian education system was historically overstretched and under-resourced—trends that FPE only worsened. Community members, the government, and international donors alike complained of a decline in learning outcomes, a lack of trained teachers, and a classroom shortage, and children began to drop out or not enroll when education experiences became disappointing or dangerous. GABLE increased the number of girls enrolled in school while FPE flooded the school system with new students in need of better educational support.

## Perspectives on the Success of Girls' Education

### *International Perceptions of Success*

Despite FPE's negative effects, GABLE was judged an international success in 1998 based on a number of quantifiable measures:

- Girls' enrollment rates increased.
- The gender gap between girls' and boys' enrollment decreased from 10 to 6 percent.
- Girls' repetition and dropout rates diminished.
- GABLE and gender became widely recognized and marketed terms.
- Ministry of Education personnel were trained in gender sensitivity.
- Villages were trained to create girls' education action plans.
- Curricula were revised to be more gender-sensitive.
- Mass media campaigns were staged.

Although large-scale reforms instituted by the government during GABLE's tenure were arguably the key to its progress, GABLE's successes were significant and, to some extent, reflected changes in people's daily lives. During fieldwork conducted in 1999, many rural interviewees were still familiar with the project and believed that GABLE was trying to achieve positive outcomes. At the same time, further research showed a number of unintended consequences, and many of the international measures of success listed in the previous paragraph were transient.

The end of the GABLE project coincided with a shift in international focus from access to quality in the EFA movement. A similar shift was visible in the donors' conception of girls' education in Malawi. As GABLE came to a close, USAID drew on international debates to argue for the importance of increased educational quality for girls. USAID shifted its female-focused funding from GABLE to a social mobilization campaign to

improve education quality, Social Mobilization Campaign for Educational Quality Project (SMC-EQ). The direct focus on gender disappeared in favor of a broader focus on gender-neutral quality issues. Measures of SMC-EQ’s success likewise reflected gender mainstreaming, with fewer girl-focused or gender-specific measures.

Pressure to achieve sustainability led GABLE to focus on mainstreaming gender parity and project activities into existing Mission of Education institutions. This resulted in a transition of GABLE’s activities and the Ministry’s gender position into broader programs soon after the project ended. Pressure to focus on the majority made radical systemic or policy transformation difficult because they are not easily incorporated into the Ministry’s bureaucracy.

### *Local Perceptions of Success*

In contrast to international measures of success, those at the community, school, and district levels were often less easily quantifiable and more closely related to people’s daily experiences. Research, including over 200 interviews and more than 20 months of participant and school observations, was conducted between 1996 and 2001 to examine local educational experiences and perceptions of GABLE’s effects.

Research revealed that people’s daily experiences in school were highly focused on gender. Retention and behavior patterns were different from those reported at the national level. Other seemingly important issues simply were not discussed in the girls’ education literature, but appeared central to understanding girls’ and boys’ experiences in and decisions about school:

- Girls attended and dropped out of school at higher rates than boys in early grades, as reported in the national education statistics used to evaluate GABLE.
- Project success on a community-by-community basis largely depended on whether a local male leader actively supported the cause.
- Despite national data indicating that boys’ enrollment is higher by eighth grade, girls attended and were called on in class at almost the same rate as boys in the observed classrooms, but were more likely to be judged incorrect.
- Boys in eighth grade were more likely to enroll but not attend classes—interviewees said this was because boys now faced greater pressure than girls to earn money.
- Girls were more likely than boys to leave school when they reached puberty and reported themselves more likely than boys to be sexually active before leaving school and more likely to get married soon after leaving.
- Adult education programs supporting older girls were cut after FPE, leaving post-pubescent, pregnant, and married girls with no obvious education options once they left school.
- In all but one observed eighth grade classroom, boys were assigned to all the high-status classroom responsibilities like timekeeping and ringing the bell, while girls were responsible for classroom maintenance like sweeping and arranging furniture.
- Boys occupied all or the majority of the chairs in classrooms that had a shortage of chairs, although girls’ school uniforms included skirts, which made them less likely to



- stand up and answer questions in class due to fears of revealing themselves.
- Although eighth-grade boys were more likely to be over-age than girls, girls were more likely than boys to be over-age at the lower grades;
  - Over-age girls were regularly singled out and condemned for attending school at a grade below their age level.
  - Boys regularly outperformed girls on school and national assessments, due in part to boys' superior grasp of English, in which all tests were administered. Test score disparities fed student, teacher, and community stereotypes that girls were less talented and less likely to reach secondary school than boys.
  - Younger, less experienced female teachers were usually assigned to teach the lowest grade levels. Girls attending school at higher grades therefore had few female role models who were elite teachers and had less protection in the classroom from male teacher sexual predation.
  - Many girls were sexualized and at risk of sexual harassment and assault in and on the way to school.
  - Girls were disproportionately affected by the AIDS epidemic, either directly or by the demands of caring for ill relatives. Sexual vulnerability and AIDS were central to the education decisions of girls and their families.

### *Girls' and Women's Perspectives*

Girls' and women's experiences with GABLE varied depending on the local conditions in which they took place. For example, in one village, a young girl's parents accepted a dowry for her marriage and forced her to withdraw from school to be married immediately. She protested their actions to village leaders, who in turn held a meeting to pressure the parents into returning the dowry and allowing the girl to continue attending school. The parents did so, and the girl was able to continue her education. Conversely, in another community, village leaders became incensed by discussions about gender and girls' education on the radio. They viewed gender and GABLE as direct attacks on their culture and way of life, openly organizing against the idea of women's equality. In this community, girls' education efforts actually had a negative effect on females' empowerment and ability to attend school. Despite these variations in experiences with girls' education efforts, a number of themes emerged:

***Schools as Sites of Failure.*** Girls and women often discussed schools as sites of their own failure—failure to do well on exams, failure to answer questions correctly, failure to finish primary school, failure to go to secondary school, failure to learn how to read, and failure to speak English. Teachers, parents, and students discussed girls' dismal class rankings in the upper grades, even while considering girls' ability to outperform boys in the lower grades. Some schools created special end-of-year prizes for the top-ranking girl in each class because girls otherwise never won awards. One girl felt that the awards made things worse, letting everyone know that girls could not compete for the same prizes as boys. Girls were regularly discussed by teachers as dull, second-rate students incapable of answering questions. Girls reported they felt out of place in school.

Classroom observations, reviews of exams, and discussions with male and female students indicated that girls started failing in large numbers around grade four or five, when their enrollment and performance in classes plummet—this is the same time that classes are supposed to start being held in English. Girls were regularly less fluent than boys in English, even at the lower grades, because girls tended to have less time than boys to do homework or practice English conversation after school.

However, the near-constant messages of failure that girls received in classrooms, the widely propagated perceptions of girls' failure, and girls' language disadvantages in upper grades were never noted or discussed in GABLE. The focus of the project remained on getting girls into schools, not on examining how schools might be transformed to serve both genders equally.

***Schools as Inappropriate Environments for Pubescent Girls.*** Girls who reached puberty often said they felt that they did not belong in school. Classroom observations and interviews revealed that teachers and male pupils regularly sexualized girls in the classroom. Female students discussed how male teachers did not treat them like daughters or pupils, but instead like girlfriends. In all but one of the assessed schools, there was or had recently been at least one girl impregnated by a male teacher. In a number of schools, the pregnant girl was a fourth or fifth grader. Girls also faced taunts from male classmates and community pressure to drop out and marry. In all cases, older girls who tried to stay in school met serious challenges.

***Fewer Education Options for Girls.*** GABLE and FPE were designed to focus resources on equal provision of basic and secondary formal education to boys and girls equally. However, a consequence of this focus was that the government diverted funding from adult and informal education to formal primary schooling. The government ignored alternative programs, such as those shown to successfully equip girls with literacy and numeracy skills in shorter periods of time. Many of the adult education students, according to interviewees, were young women who were considered too old to be in formal schools or who had recently been married. GABLE and FPE's focus on formal basic education thus indirectly undercut important education opportunities of older girls and girls with time constraints.

***Female Teachers' Experiences.*** A number of GABLE's activities aimed to provide girls with educated role models. The project, however, did little to directly address the constraints facing female schoolteachers, the most obvious role models. Interviews and observations revealed that female teachers were treated like second-class citizens. They were regularly assigned to the largest and lowest status classes, were seldom sent to workshops or trainings, and were rarely assigned school management responsibilities. While GABLE attempted to provide gender-appropriate training for all new teachers, it did not address the daily inequalities that women working in schools faced.

***Why Educate Girls?*** A common question among girls and women was how school would improve their lives. Most families wanted their children to go to school if it



meant that children could, as a result, get jobs in the formal labor market. Such jobs are increasingly scarce in Malawi, where the labor market is in decline, and are more often awarded to males. As studies have shown, opportunity costs for primary schooling are generally higher for girls, particularly poor girls, than for boys. Parents and students also wanted to be literate and numerate so that they could access other services (e.g., health care, bus systems, small business opportunities) and so that they would not be cheated. Schooling no longer appeared to be linked to formal labor opportunities, and interviewees often complained that schools could no longer provide students with even basic literacy and numeracy skills. Thus, by attending schools that many considered useless, parents and children lost out on job and income opportunities elsewhere.

***The Discrepancy between Promises and Realities.*** The calculus parents and children used to determine the costs and benefits of schooling differed between girls and boys and across geography. GABLE often drew upon this calculus, portraying educated girls as subject to more paid labor opportunities and as mothers of healthier families. In people’s daily experiences, however, this calculation did not always add up. The discrepancy between GABLE’s promises and the actual effects of sending girls to existing overcrowded, low-quality, gendered schools was often significant, which led to distrust of both girls’ education and FPE .

***Gender-Differentiated Schools and Labor Markets.*** GABLE was designed to increase girls’ school enrollment, not to address or transform schooling or institutionalized sexism. Thus, the project had the unintended consequence of bringing more girls into an environment in which they ran a higher risk of being mistreated and considered failures. Because the project did not impact the broader economic, social, or educational structures in which the schools operated, the costs and risks (e.g., pregnancy, messages of failure) that girls faced by attending school were not necessarily coupled with improved opportunities. Likewise, the project did not address the growing pressure on boys to drop out of school and participate in wage-earning labor or the declining formal job opportunities available to educated boys and girls.

Positive Direct and Indirect Effects of Girls’ and Women’s Education
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fulfills females’ right to education</li> <li>• Increases productivity</li> <li>• Reduces family size</li> <li>• Improves women’s health</li> <li>• Improves children’s health</li> </ul>

USAID Typology of Donor Responses to Gender and Education
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Neutral: no gender focus or analysis</li> <li>• Minimal: rhetoric without analysis or action</li> <li>• Female-targeted: interventions analyze and address girls’ issues</li> <li>• Gender-focused: interventions analyze and address differentiated girls’ and boys’ issues</li> </ul>

### GABLE in the Context of Transition

As discussed previously, GABLE took place during a time of significant political, economic, and social transformation in Malawi. Interviewees experienced and judged GABLE and its effects in terms of these broader political, economic, and social contexts.

### *Political Change*

Interviewees often talked about democracy and gender as foreign notions that were instituted in Malawi during the mid-1990s. In some communities, gender was lumped with democracy and perceived as fueling anarchy, while in others, the notion of gender was discussed as an external effort to rearrange relations of power and authority in communities. GABLE itself was widely perceived as an unfair program because rich girls received support from the program while poor or orphaned boys did not. Thus, some people associated gender and gender-parity-focused programming with inequity. The project tried to address this issue, but interviews showed that many people remained unconvinced of the fairness of GABLE's activities and of girls' education efforts in general.

### *Economic Change*

When asked how they felt about girls' education and GABLE's efforts to enroll more girls in school, many interviewees discussed what they perceived as the broader failure of formal education. Since schooling no longer resulted in increased financial opportunities for most graduates, many questioned the point of attending school. At the same time that GABLE and FPE urged communities to support schooling, Malawians faced increased financial burdens as markets were liberalized and daily life became increasingly monetized. Boys and girls faced greater pressure to earn money and support themselves and their families. Interviewees often felt that moneymaking opportunities were increasingly less linked to schooling. At the same time, new job opportunities that did not depend on schooling increased. Students, principally girls, also faced the burden of balancing school with responsibilities at home, like nursing sick and HIV-positive relatives and filling the roles of dead parents.

### *Educational Change*

Not only did most interviewees feel that schooling had become less valuable after FPE, but most also felt that the quality of schooling had declined, which made them less likely to enroll their children in school. Some quality issues appeared to affect boys and girls equally, while others, such as teacher behavior and furniture resources, affected girls more than boys. Parents and students reported that girls were regularly harassed while traveling to and from school, and most female pupils in upper grades reported harassment at school. Sexual harassment complaints against teachers seldom resulted in action because of the wide-ranging teacher shortage in the country, leaving parents and students feeling unsafe in some schools.

### *Social Issues*

Some communities felt that the formal schooling advocated by GABLE threatened certain socio-cultural practices. This was, in some ways, a desired outcome of the project, which aimed to challenge beliefs that were perceived as opposed to gender equality. In other communities, GABLE and girls' education were discussed as efforts to make Malawi more modern or developed. Whether viewed as threatening or modernizing, there were few interviewees who expressed that GABLE was a project that reflected the wants and needs of local communities. As such, community members



seldom felt ownership of girls' education activities and seldom discussed or tried to change activities with which they felt uncomfortable.

### *Leadership*

Whether villages sent more girls to school and supported GABLE depended in part on whether the villages gained the support of at least one local or district leader. These leaders tended to be male, and they supported girls' education for a variety of reasons. Leaders often united the community around projects that benefited both boys and girls, such as building a bridge to the school, and were the people most likely to challenge the project's activities. Although they played a pivotal role in local projects' successes, the leaders' role was seldom discussed or examined, nor were efforts made to feminize local project leadership.

### *Success or Failure Is Local*

Communities judged the successes and failures of the project based largely on how the project affected their lives. GABLE's perceived successes and failures were intimately linked to community members' daily experiences and the political, economic, and socio-cultural changes occurring simultaneously. Community members responded in different ways to the project, but broad themes also united these responses. These themes point to alternative questions concerning girls' education efforts' success and failure. Did the efforts:

- Engage communities in debate about the purposes and intentions of education, specifically girls' education?
- Engage communities in an ongoing dialogue about the fairness of girl-focused projects and potentially restructure its programming to address local equity concerns?
- Identify and provide support for individuals who take the lead in adopting girls' education and gender equity causes?
- Transform the role or outcomes of schooling so that sending girls and boys to school is an economic, political, and social step that makes sense to poor families?
- Address the very real financial pressures and opportunities that boys and girls face outside school?
- Address the broader equity issues that affect girls' and boys' educational experiences and consider alternatives to adding children to the existing mix?
- Collect data on females' and males' education experiences, wants, and needs throughout the life cycle and in formal and informal work settings?
- Prove themselves flexible enough to shift support as data emerged to sub-sectors of the education system that may be more effective vehicles for achieving gender equity (e.g., adult education, informal education)?
- Provide space and support for education transformation (e.g., restructuring schools to serve as safe places for boys and girls)?
- Collaborate with women and men from throughout the project area to create and implement gender and education activities?

## Lessons about Gender in Education

### *Gender Models*

The government of Malawi and GABLE’s gender parity message was regularly characterized in interviewees as “foreign” or “against culture.” The model was perceived by many as fundamentally unfair for giving females an advantage. Male and female interviewees commented on the unnatural idea that both genders can and should do everything that the other does—many commented that men cannot breastfeed and women should not have to build houses. Activities such as GABLE scholarships, for which recipients were selected based only on gender, reinforced the sense that the project’s gender model was unfair and foreign. These perceptions were embodied by resistance to efforts that addressed gender issues nationwide and resistance to efforts that improved education parity in some communities.

A gender-as-equity model might have been a more effective model for interviewees to buy into and for the project to adopt. This model acknowledges and often challenges differentiated roles and pursues broader discussions about equity. In contrast, GABLE identified local understanding of gender as cultural constraints to girls’ education that had to be overcome. As fieldwork indicated, some of these constraints reflected a powerful concern about equality that could have served as a leverage point for addressing gender inequities in and beyond girls’ education.

### *Context as Constraint*

GABLE was introduced in a rapidly changing social, cultural, and economic milieu. Malawi’s 1994 shift to a multiparty democracy brought rapid social and economic change. For example, the new president stripped local leaders of governance roles and disbanded the previous regime’s security forces. Within this environment, many people, especially men, saw GABLE as an anarchist effort at the family level. As a result, girls’ education became significant of men’s control of women in schools, marriage, and daily life rather than the process of sending a girl to school.

These concerns could have led to generative discussions about gender relations and deteriorating safety and economic situations in a democratic country. However, these concerns were reframed as cultural constraints for the GABLE project to solve, and donor and government efforts to address issues in the education and the democracy and governance sector did not learn from or inform one another, in part because the project was designed to affect change only in relation to the education sector.

### *GABLE and FPE*

GABLE was implemented at the same time as FPE and, as such, girls were encouraged to enter school just as general school enrollment greatly increased. On one hand, GABLE’s efforts benefited from broader popular support for FPE. On the other, FPE almost doubled primary school enrollment in less than six months, but created a low-quality education environment and rendered primary school degrees less useful. GABLE did



not address these changes during its implementation, despite the fact that FPE was transforming the meaning and outcomes of primary schooling in Malawi.

Many interviewees viewed primary schooling as an increasingly less useful institution, in part because of the rapid monetization of daily life, which created new moneymaking opportunities and burdens for girls and boys. The particular burdens that girls faced in and out of school—male teachers who regularly impregnated female students, the dangers of walking to and from the schools, inadequate positive feedback and achievement in school, a tremendous increase in AIDS-care burdens—led them and their parents to weigh the potential benefits of schooling more carefully than they might have before FPE. GABLE did not directly address these concerns.

### *Local Ownership of the Change Process*

Although the government of Malawi's girls' education and GABLE activities were generally planned and implemented from the top down, the social mobilization campaign in particular provided space for community organization, leadership, and action on the topic. In cases where individuals were interested in supporting girls' education, the widespread publicity for GABLE and the project's support for local initiatives created space for them to take action and developed language to rationalize their actions. For example, in one community, a retired schoolteacher organized parents to monitor students' school attendance and mobilized local leaders to pressure parents who were not sending their children to school.

A related positive, unintended consequence of local ownership was that GABLE became a tool for some community members to influence school operations. For example, GABLE supported some communities' creation of education action plans. While many of these plans did not specifically target girls or gender issues, they provided a mechanism for community members to express concerns about education processes and assume a role in education decision making. GABLE thus played an important role in democratizing education in some villages, although this role was not directly recognized or built upon by any education or governance project.

### *Being Female in School*

These observations about the GABLE project underscore the fact that parity addresses neither the very different school experiences of girls and boys nor the extent to which schools meet the different needs of students. Parity models do not focus on the different pressures that girls and boys face in and out of school and, therefore, avoid the different types of institutional arrangements that may create equitable education outcomes for different students. A girl struggling to attend school and care for and feed her family faces a different set of constraints and possibilities than a boy who is pressured to earn money through labor and sees no benefit in a school experience that does not increase his earning capacity.

## Conclusions

### *Complex Outcomes and Unintended Consequences*

Interviewees' experiences with GABLE and other girls' education activities differed widely. In some villages, GABLE and mass media messages about gender provided a framework for increased community ownership of the school. In other villages, there were misogynistic and sometimes violent responses to the notion of gender as a signifier in the education context. GABLE helped convince girls to attend school, which placed some girls in danger. While GABLE helped reverse the gender gap in grade one enrollment to the extent that more girls now enroll than boys, the official grade eight gender enrollment gap, however, still favors boys at almost the same rate as before GABLE. GABLE helped shift resources towards formal, basic education, ensuring more girls could enroll, but this shift led to deep budget cuts for adult education programs that, during the Banda era, served over 80 percent of girls and women who were considered too old to go to school.

GABLE's girls' education activities reflect the needs of international donors and national governments and focus on quantifiable, measurable goals and outcomes. They do not effectively capture the complexity of the outcomes or the unintended consequences that often result when project planning contradicts the realities of daily life. In the long run, the inability of current gender and education activities to identify and respond to the unintended consequences of project implementation will constrain effectiveness. To the extent that policy activities can identify and respond to daily practices, such activities can be strengthened and their sustainability can be further ensured.

### *Reshaping the Agenda*

One lesson from Malawi's girls' education efforts is that gender and education advancements, no matter how remarkable, are complex and easily lost. Looking ahead in the twenty-first century, a strengthened and refocused gender and education agenda is needed. Several themes for improving this agenda emerge from the Malawi case study.

### *Shifting from Top-Down to Collaborative Policymaking Models*

A shift from top-down to participatory policymaking, monitoring, and evaluation practices could help assure that gender and education activities are informed by and responsive to the complex social, cultural, political, and economic environments in which they are implemented. To avoid and correct unintended consequences, all stakeholders must have some ability to determine the shape, scope, and intended outcomes of gender and education activities. However, trying to achieve all of these goals concurrently is more difficult than maintaining one set of clear, population-wide guidelines for success and failure. These goals call for more diverse emphases, activities, and intended outcomes, more complex and collaborative policy activities, more open discussions about differences of opinions held by various parties, and more compromises. In the long run, collaborative approaches will ensure that negative unintended consequences are addressed, that positive ones are built upon, and that sustained change in gender and education issues occurs.



### *Shifting from Female-Focused to Gender-Focused Strategies*

A gender equity focus allows greater attention to be paid to gender dynamics, as opposed to parity, empowers projects to respond to the constraints like quality issues that both girls and boys face without erasing a gender lens, and provides greater flexibility in setting goals and capturing effects and outcomes. In the long run, gender equity models will depend on institutionalization of positive schooling experiences for all and a sustainable vision of gender equity that pervades people's daily lives, including their schooling experiences.

### *Alternative Models of Education Provision*

Discussion is emerging about the potentially negative consequences of EFA's lockstep approach to providing education to underserved populations. This model aims to incorporate all children into existing formal schools. Historically, the formal schools into which children are being incorporated, however, have generally served to create a primarily male elite. Their pedagogies, assessments, and curricula favor males and non-minorities who have the time and resources to move through the education system in a manner consistent with formal Western models of student learning. Assessment of the GABLE project suggests that examining alternative models for educational provision, such as supporting adult and informal education programs, and reexamining possibilities for transforming formal schools to better serve all children should be central to gender and education activities.

### *Child/Student-Centered Strategies*

The broader international development field is starting to discuss the need for multi-sectoral development strategies that target change in people's lives. Such strategies are particularly necessary in the education arena, where the links between formal schooling, health, and labor markets are of increasing concern to community members and governments. Program models that start with people's daily lives and work out from those experiences to address the interrelations between education and various other sectors provide an alternative model of multi-sectoral work from which projects are more likely to benefit. Studies and performance monitoring and evaluation activities that center parents' and children's daily educational, economic, and social experiences can inform project performance monitoring and evaluation activities and more effectively address the concerns that community members have about schooling.

#### **Lessons for Planning, Monitoring, and Evaluating Gender and Education Activities**

- A focus on girls' education improves development, education, and girls' lives.
- Female-focused models are less effective than gender-focused models.
- Communities should help plan and evaluate gender and education activities.
- Evaluating both intended and unintended effects strengthens top-down evaluations.
- Collaborative PME activities foster change more effectively than top-down PME activities.
- Multisectoral orientation and collaboration improve gender and education activities.
- Gender and education activities should provide space for innovative problem-solving.
- Girls' and boys' education experiences and outcomes should be examined concurrently.

## References

- Abu-Ghaida, D., and S. Klasen. 2004. "The Costs of Missing the Millennium Development Goal on Gender Equity." *World Development* 32 (7): 1075-1107.
- Bloch, M., J. Beoku-Betts, and R. Tabachnik, eds. 1998. *Women and Education in Sub-Saharan Africa: Power, Opportunities, and Constraints*. London, England: Lynn Reinner Publishers.
- Department for International Development (DFID). 2005. *Girls' Education: Towards a Better Future for All*. London, England: DFID.
- Millennium Project Task Force on Education and Gender Equality. 2003. Interim Report on Achieving the Millennium Development Goal of Universal Primary Education.
- Malawi Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology. 2002. "The Main Education Challenges Facing Malawi." Viewed at <http://www.malawi.gov.mw/educ/educchalle.htm>
- Miske, S., and D. van Belle-Prouty. 1997. *Schools Are for Girls Too: Creating an Environment of Validation* (Technical Paper No. 41). Washington, D.C.: United States Agency for International Development (USAID).
- Moser, C. 1993. *Gender Planning and Development: Theory, Practice and Training*. London, England, and New York, N.Y.: Routledge.
- Rugh, A. 2002. *Multisectoral Approaches in Advancing Girls' Education: Lessons Learned in Five SAGE Countries*. Washington, D.C.: Academy for Educational Development (AED).
- Save the Children UK. 2005. "Achieving the Gender Parity Millennium Development Goal: What Needs to Be Done". London, England: Save the Children UK.
- Save the Children. 2005. *State of the World's Mothers 2005: The Power and Promise of Girls' Education*. Washington, D.C.: Save the Children.
- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). 2001. *Monitoring Report on Education for All*. Paris, France: UNESCO.
- United States Agency for International Development (USAID). 2004. "USAID: Women in Development." Viewed at [http://www.usaid.gov/our\\_work/cross-cutting\\_programs/wid/](http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/cross-cutting_programs/wid/)
- World Bank. 1996. *Leveling the Playing Field: Giving Girls an Equal Chance for Basic Education—Three Countries' Efforts*. Washington, D.C.: World Bank Economic Development Institute (EDI) Learning Resources Series.



## Acknowledgements

This paper was written for EQUIP2 by Nancy Kendall, 2006. An EQUIP2 Policy Brief version of this paper is also available.

**EQUIP2: Educational Policy, Systems Development, and Management** is one of three USAID-funded Leader with Associates Cooperative Agreements under the umbrella heading Educational Quality Improvement Program (EQUIP). As a Leader with Associates mechanism, EQUIP2 accommodates buy-in awards from USAID bureaus and missions to support the goal of building education quality at the national, sub-national, and cross-community levels.

**FHI 360** is the lead organization for the global EQUIP2 partnership of education and development organizations, universities, and research institutions. The partnership includes fifteen major organizations and an expanding network of regional and national associates throughout the world: Aga Khan Foundation, American Institutes for Research, CARE, Center for Collaboration and the Future of Schooling, East-West Center, Education Development Center, International Rescue Committee, Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr. Foundation, Michigan State University, Mississippi Consortium for International Development, ORC Macro, Research Triangle Institute, University of Minnesota, University of Pittsburgh Institute of International Studies in Education, Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children.

### For more information about EQUIP2, please contact:

#### USAID

##### Patrick Collins

CTO EGAT/ED  
USAID Washington  
1300 Pennsylvania Ave., NW  
Washington, DC 20532  
Tel: 202-712-4151  
Email: [pcollins@usaid.gov](mailto:pcollins@usaid.gov)

#### FHI 360

##### John Gillies

EQUIP2 Project Director  
1825 Connecticut Ave., NW  
Washington, DC 20009  
Tel: 202-884-8256  
Email: [equip2@fhi360.org](mailto:equip2@fhi360.org)  
Web: [www.equip123.net](http://www.equip123.net)

This paper was made possible by the generous support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) under Cooperative Agreement No. GDG-A-00-03-00008-00. The contents are the responsibility of the FHI 360 through the Educational Quality Improvement Program 2 (EQUIP2) and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.