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Educational Quality Improvement Program
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Why Gender Equity in Education Reform?

A review of education reform programming finds that female-focused and top-down efforts are only marginally effective. A shift to bottom-up, participatory policymaking, monitoring, and evaluation practices helps assure that gender and education activities are informed by and are responsive to complex social, cultural, political, and economic conditions. Evidence from a study of the Girls' Attainment in Basic Literacy and Education (GABLE) Project in Malawi shows that success, sustainability, and impact rely on:

- Collaborative, multi-sectoral, child/parent-centered policymaking models;
- A shift from female-focused parity models to gender-focused equity models;
- Recognition of alternative education models; and
- Reform of existing traditional schools to better serve all children, particularly girls.

A gender equity focus allows for greater attention to gender dynamics, as opposed to parity; allows projects to respond to the constraints that both girls and boys face, such as education quality issues, without erasing a gender lens; and provides greater flexibility in setting goals and capturing effects and outcomes. Girls' and boys' educational experiences and outcomes are interrelated and can be examined as a single issue. In the long run, gender equity models are dependent on institutionalization of positive school experiences for all and a sustainable vision of gender equity that pervades daily life. This equity perspective must also include and not draw funding away from alternative models like adult education, non-formal systems, and complementary education programs that reach underserved populations who would not have access to reformed primary education, even if it were more equitable and sustainable.

Girls' education activities typically reflect the particular needs of international donors and national governments and focus on easily quantified and measurable goals and outcomes. In contrast to international success or failure, measures at the community, school, and district levels are hard to quantify and more closely relate to people's daily experiences. In the case of GABLE, experiences varied according to the conditions in which activities were enacted and often relied on credence to or contradiction with non-education gender functions like marriage and dowry and enlistment of girls and women to be advocates for their own cause. Accordingly, empowerment and systems change in many communities can only find success in light of gender equity, not challenges to longstanding roles of women.

To avoid and correct unintended consequences—including perceived attacks on local cultures and entrenched values systems—all stakeholders must have some ability to determine the shape, scope, and projected outcomes of reform activities. Maintaining one set of clear, population-wide guidelines for change and growth in Malawi proved more successful than simultaneously implementing several new activities or concurrently working toward all gender and education goals. GABLE found that impact and sustainability called for diverse and holistic thematic emphasis, awareness of far-reaching expectations, complex and collaborative policy activities, constant communication, and flexibility to compromise. In the long run, collaborative approaches swiftly address negative and unintended consequences, build upon positive outcomes, and sustain change in gender and education.

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