

Malawi's Experience in Promoting Girls Education

The Global Women's Action Network for Children Conference, June 11-13 2003,

King Hussein Bin Talal Convention Center, Dead Sea, Jordan

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1. Country context

Malawi is a small landlocked country in southern Africa covering 118,484 square kilometres, 20% of which comprises lakes and rivers. Malawi is one of the most densely populated countries in Africa with population density of 105 persons per square kilometre and an estimated population of 12.8 million in 2006. Women constitute more than half the population and are disproportionately represented amongst the poor and ultra poor.

Malawi's socio-economic indicators are poor and among the lowest in the world. Its GNI per capita has averaged less than US\$200 over the past decade. Poverty is both deep and pervasive. According to a recent household survey 52% of the population in Malawi is classified as poor while 22% are classified as ultra-poor i.e. living in extreme poverty¹. The incidence of poverty is severe in rural areas with an estimated 56% of the rural population classified as poor compared to 24% of the urban population. Inequality levels are quite high with 20% of the richest consuming 56% of the wealth and 20% of the poorest consuming only 5%². Infant mortality stands at 76 deaths per 1,000 live births, child mortality at 133 deaths per 1,000 live births and maternal mortality at 984 deaths per 1,000 live births and are amongst the highest in the world³. Malawi is also one of the countries worst hit by the AIDS epidemic with an estimated 12% of the sexually active population (i.e. 15-49 years) infected with the HIV virus⁴. As a consequence of the AIDS epidemic life expectancy for the average Malawian decreased from 45 years in 1995 to 39 years.

Since the implementation of structural adjustment programmes from the early 1980's Malawi's economy performance has been erratic averaging 1% between 1980 and 1994 and 4% since 1994. Agriculture is the mainstay of the economy with 85% surviving on subsistence farming.

Malawi has been a relatively stable country in a region that has been largely politically volatile in the past. From independence in 1964 up to 1994 Malawi followed a one party system in which basic human rights were grossly violated and freedom of expression restricted. From 1994 Malawi adopted a multiparty system of government and in 1995 a new Republican constitution that safeguards the rights of women and children and guarantees education as a fundamental human right was adopted. In addition Malawi is a signatory of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) thus has international obligations to provide education to all her children.

¹ National Statistical Office 2005, Integrated Household Survey 2004-2005 Volume 1 Household socio-economic characteristics, Zomba: NSO.

² *ibid*

³ NSO & ORC Macro 2005, Malawi Demographic and Health Survey 2004, Calverton, Maryland: NSO and ORC Macro

⁴ *ibid*

2. Trends in primary school enrolment in Malawi

The school system in Malawi follows an 8-4-4 structure: 8 years of primary, 4 years of secondary and up to 4 years of tertiary education. Primary school enrolments, which had been expanding albeit slowly since independence, increased extremely rapidly in 1994 following the introduction of free primary education (FPE) when an additional one million children enrolled in school representing an overall increase of 51% and nearly 60% increase in enrolments in the first grade alone.

Table 1 Primary school enrolments by gender, 1990–2005

Year	Total	Girls	% Girls
1990/1	1,400,682	633,319	45.2
1991/2	1,662,583	760,718	45.6
1992/3	1,795,451	847,974	47.2
1993/4	1,895,423	912,126	48.1
1994/5	2,860,819	1,345,311	47.0
1995/6	2,887,107	1,358,543	47.0
1997	2,905,950	1,384,782	47.7
1998	2,805,785	1,362,985	48.6
1999	2,896,280	1,395,937	48.2
2000	3,016,972	1,456,112	48.4
2001	3,187,835	1,544,506	48.4
2002	3,164,191	1,552,039	49.0
2003	3,067,843	1,522,463	49.6
2004	3,166,786	1,576,593	49.8
2005	3,200,646	1,593,558	49.8

Source: MoE *Basic Education Statistics* (various years)

Prior to the introduction of FPE half of the school-age children in Malawi were not attending school and the majority of these were girls. At the beginning of the 1990s decade the majority of children enrolled in school were boys and girls comprised of less than half the enrolment – 45% in 1990. The proportion of girls steadily increased over the years with remarkable progress seen in the period when girls' education became a focus of government policy from 1991 with the launching of the Girls Attainment in Basic Literacy and Education (GABLE) programme funded by USAID. During this period the proportion of girls increased to 48% of the primary school enrolments in 1993/94 only to decrease by one percentage point in 1994 when FPE was introduced. The immediate effect of FPE was to increase the proportion of boys in school as many more older boys than girls took advantage of FPE and enrolled in school reversing the trends in the previous two years when girls enrolment were increasing at a faster rate than boys enrolments directly as a result of the efforts to improve girls' access to school under the GABLE programme. Girls' enrolments picked up again after the fall-out from FPE has eased and by 2005 nearly half of the primary school enrolments were girls. Though girls comprise half the enrolments this is still an under-representation because there are more girls than boys in the school age population.

Table 2 Trends in gross enrolment rates by household expenditure quintile and gender⁵

Year	GER			NER		
	Girls	Boys	GPI	Girls	Boys	GPI
1990/91	75	86	0.87	50	52	0.96
1992/93	-	-	-	60	57	1.05
1994/95	96	121	0.79	96 ⁶	96	1.00
1997	113	128	0.88	78	76	1.03
1998	115.2	125.9	0.91	79.2	77.3	1.02
2002	111.4	117.9	0.94	80.8	81.0	1.00
2004	130	144	0.90	81.4	78.5	1.04
2005	106.1	112.9	0.94	81.4	78.5	1.04

Over the past decade great strides have been made to reduce gender disparities in educational attainment in the Malawi education system particularly at primary level. Prior to this period wide and persistent gender gaps were evident across all levels of the educational system. In addition educational outcomes were poorer for girls than boys. Girls had lower persistence rates and academic achievement was also worse for girls. As indicated in Table 4 before 1992/93 GERs and NERs reflected large gender gaps in favour of boys. The proportion of school age girls greatly improved from 1992/93 coinciding with the launching of the GABLE programme and gender parity was achieved for first time and has been maintained to present time. However GER tell a different story. In 2004 there were still wide gender gaps in favour of boys due to the presence of overage boys in the system and to the fact that overage girls do not persist in school with the majority likely to dropout after reaching puberty when the social pressure for them to get married intensifies.

Though Malawi has made great strides in increasing access of children especially girls to school these have resulted in negligible improvements in completion rates. High dropout and repetition rates have resulted in low survival rates. And the survival rates are lower for girls than boys because after grade 4 girls dropout in higher numbers than boys. While the genders entered grade 1 in roughly same numbers (47% girls and 53% boys) girls were nearly twice as likely to leave school prematurely. As a consequence literacy levels are low especially for women, though they have greatly improved over the year the rate of change is lower than expected given the massive enrolments that occurred after 1994 because of the high dropout rate which occurs before the majority have acquired permanent literacy and numeracy. The recent Integrated Household survey conducted in 2004-2005 estimated that 76% of males are literate compared to 50% of women.

⁵ Source: 1990/1 and 1997 Al-Samarrai and Zaman 2002; 1992/93 Kadzamura & Chibwana 2000, 1994/5 Castro-Leal 1996, 1998, NEC (2000), 2002 (NSO & ORC Macro 2003), 2004 (NSO & ORC Macro 2005), 2005 (NSO 2005)

⁶ NER for 1994/95 from MOE Basic Education Statistics 1995

3. Reasons why schoolgirls were not in school and did not complete primary school

The main reasons identified by research for girls non enrolment and lack of persistence in school before the introduction of GABLE programme were school expenses, poor school quality as well as socio-cultural attitudes that did not favour girls education. Lack of school fees was the most common reason given for non-enrolment and dropout by both parents and girls in major surveys carried out before the total abolition of fees in late 1994⁷. For girls additional financial constraints included cost of school uniform, which was found to be more expensive than boys' uniform. In addition opportunity costs of sending girls to school were greater because households relied heavily on girls labour. Studies consistently showed that girls spent more time on domestic chores than boys leaving them very few opportunities for studying. Before GABLE parental preference for educating their sons over daughters was quite pronounced and generally parents and the wider society had lower expectations of girls' performance and educational attainment. Late entry into school which was common especially among rural children had particularly disastrous effects on girls' persistence in school most of whom dropped out while still in lower primary once puberty caught up with them. Schools were also generally not girl friendly in particular did not attend to their sanitation needs.

4. Strategies Malawi adopted to address the problem

The GABLE Programme

To improve girls' education outcomes the government with support from USAID launched the GABLE programme in 1991 and was implemented in two phases under GABLE I and GABLE II to the tune of US\$82m. The main objective of the GABLE was to increase girls' attainment (defined as access, persistence and completion in primary school) in basic education. To achieve the overall objective GABLE had three supporting objectives:

- To increase the long term financial resource base of education,
- To improve the quality, availability and efficiency of primary education and
- To improve the relevance of primary education for girls.

Basically GABLE was a sector reform programme, which aimed at promoting system wide changes in the education sector while at the same time addressing gender disparities in education by introducing interventions specifically aimed at promoting girls education. GABLE was multi-faceted in its approach using a variety of strategies that were well synchronized using a mix of policy reforms and project activities to address the complex and multiple constraints faced by girls in attaining their education.

The strategies GABLE adopted to promote girls education included those aimed at reducing the cost of educating girls, helping girls complete more schooling before

⁷ e.g. Maganga & Mkandawire 1988, Kadzombe 1988, Kainja & Mkandawire 1990, Davison and Kanyuka 1990, Hyde & Kadzamira 1994

they take on adult roles, creating a gender sensitive environment, social mobilisation campaign and piloting strategies to reduce distance from school and provide female role models which could later inform national policy. A large component of the GABLE policy reforms were targeted at improving the overall primary education system by allocating more financial resources to the education sector and primary education sector in particular, improving the overall efficiency and effectiveness of the primary education system and improving the quality of primary education system the rationale for adopting this approach was based on the evidence that the inefficiencies and poor quality of the education system contributed to the poorer education outcomes of girls than boys.

A. Strategies to moderate the cost of sending girls to schools

Since poverty in Malawi is both severe and widespread the majority of the poor households find the cost of schooling to be prohibitive and educating children constituted a heavy financial burden. Furthermore there was evidence to indicate that many parents were more willing to invest in their son's than daughter's education largely because the benefits of schooling for girls were less visible. Lack of money to pay for school fees was a frequent reason given for children particularly girls not being in school. School uniform, which costed more than the amount required for fees was a major constraint to girls' schooling since it was more expensive than boys' uniform. In the light of this evidence a number of GABLE reforms attempted to reduce the direct costs of schooling to households for girls. The strategies introduced were:

i. School fee waivers for non-repeating primary school girls

The school fee waivers were introduced in the 1992/93 school year. The school fee waivers were aimed at non-repeating girls in standards 2 to 8. It was hoped that targeting non-repeating girls would motivate girls to perform better thereby reducing the high repetition rates. The intention of the school fee waivers was to increase the persistence of girls in primary school once they have enrolled rather than increasing access in so doing demonstrating girls abilities and the benefits of educating girls in the hope of altering societal expectations of girls. It was for this reason that the school fee waivers targeted girls from standard 2 rather than standard 1. The school fee waivers were implemented over two school years and were discontinued when free primary education was introduced in 1994. It is estimated that about a million girls benefited from the waivers over the two-year period.

The school fee waivers for non-repeating girls in primary schools and the other policy reforms undertaken under GABLE had a positive influence on enrolment and persistence of girls in primary school. Girls' enrolments increased significantly over the increases that occurred with the tuition fee waivers and free primary education. Between 1990/91 and 1992/93, prior to the implementation of free primary education total enrolments grew by 35 percent (an average of 11 percent per annum). Girls' enrolments grew at a faster rate than boys' enrolments an average of 15 percent per annum compared to 9 percent per annum for boys. Girls' enrolment grew twice as much as boys' enrolment in the two years the GABLE school fee waivers were being implemented (see Table 3).

Table 3 Primary School Enrolments 1990-1998

Year	Total	% Growth	Female	% Growth	Male	% Growth
1990/91	1,400,682	5.7	628,706	5.9	771,976	5.5
1991/92	1,662,583	18.7	706,718	21.0	901,865	16.8
1992/93	1,795,451	8.0	847,974	11.5	947,477	5.1
1993/94	1,895,423	5.6	912,126	7.6	983,297	3.8
1994/95	2,860,819	50.6	1,345,311	47.5	1,515,508	54.1
1995/96	2,887,107	0.9	1,358,832	1.0	1,520,118	0.9
1997	2,905,950	0.5	1,295,200	0.2	1,374,045	-0.6

The proportion (51%) of girls entering standard 1 in 1992/93 when the school fee waivers were introduced in 1992/93 surpassed that of boys (49%) for the first time ever and had increased by 2% from 49 percent in 1991/92. This was also reflected in the enrolment rates and in 1992/93 for the first time ever girls net enrolment ratio surpassed that of boys. There are also indications that the persistence of girls in the school system also increased during the period from 30 percent in 1988/89 to 38 percent in 1992/93⁸.

The policy had also created controversies as communities challenged the idea of giving fee waivers to girls only and not boys, the debates around the fee waivers helped raise awareness of importance of girls' education and helped put girls, education on the national agenda.

ii. Abolishing requirements for school uniform

Several research studies conducted before the design of GABLE had shown girls' uniforms to be more expensive than boys. The prevailing practice was to send back home children not wearing uniform. For this reason school uniform was one of the issues on focus during the design of GABLE. In 1992, the government issued a policy on school uniform, which stipulated that uniform, was not a requirement for attendance and children should not be sent away from school for not wearing one. Non-compliance to the policy by school authorities was reported and in 1995 under pressure from GABLE the government reiterated its policy on school uniforms and stated that pupils should not be forced to wear any form of uniform but should be advised to put on simple and neat clothing. This was accompanied by mass media communication through the radio, which made communities aware of the policy and forced school authorities to implement the policy accordingly.

iii. Scholarships for secondary school girls

After the total abolition of school fees in 1994, the school fee waivers for primary school girls were no longer necessary and the funds were shifted to secondary level to support the scholarship scheme for secondary school girls. Initially the scholarship were awarded to needy girls only but was changed to target all non-repeating girls in secondary schools because of the implementation problems encountered (such as lengthy process for issuing scholarships, lack of knowledge of the programme by girls, delays in receiving funds) in the first year of operation which made it impossible

⁸ USAID/Malawi 1994, Girls Attainment in Basic Literacy and Education (GABLE) Amendment

to target all the needy girls. The scholarships covered tuition, boarding and examination fees. The main purpose of the scholarship programme for secondary school girls was to encourage girls to persist in primary school and complete their primary education. The rationale was that the scholarship programme would increase the proportion of girls in secondary schools, which would act as an incentive for girls to complete their primary education.

B. Strategies to increase girls persistence in school

A number of policies were reviewed in order to increase the persistence of girls in school. Puberty related issues such as early marriages; teenage pregnancy and initiation ceremonies were some of the most frequently cited reasons for lack of persistence in school amongst girls by a number of studies, which had been commissioned under the auspices of GABLE. In particular the studies had revealed that the rate of girls dropping out of school because of pregnancy was very high and cultural constraints coupled with late entry into school hindered girls persistence in school. Thus need to review existing policies on pregnancy, repetition and entry age were needed to counter some of these constraints.

i. Pregnancy policy

Prior to GABLE girls found to be pregnant faced permanent expulsion from school a policy that was widely condemned by local women's groups such as CCAM and NCWID. In 1993 a new pregnancy policy was issued which allowed girls to return to school after delivery. In early years of implementation the policy met initially met strong resistance from school and district personnel though was supported by parents and the communities. Implementation was reinforced later by social mobilisation campaign (SMC) activities, which held discussions with communities and parents about the pregnancy policy and helped disseminate the policy to communities. As a result of the SMC activities it was reported that many girls who had dropped out because of pregnancy were encouraged to return to school⁹.

ii. Repetition policy

The rationale for introducing new repetition policy was based on the premise that if repetition rates were reduced girls would rapidly move through the system and they would be able to complete their education before the onset of puberty when societal pressures for them to get married and have children are great. The new repetition policy issued under the GABLE programme set repetition targets for standards 1-7, which were different for standards 1 & 2 (18%) and standards 3-7 (10%) and the percentages expected to reduce each subsequent year. For standard 8 the policy stated that only 25% (80% of whom would have repeated only once and 20% more than once) of pupils could be allowed to be repeaters- down from a high of 45-50% in the early 1990s- and 75% of pupils in standard 8 would be non-repeaters. Implementation of the repetition policy was fraught with problems especially for standard 1-7 both at the school and systemic levels. Government support for the

⁹ Brouder, A and A.C. Munthali 1996, Forum for African Women Educationalists in Malawi: the Agathe Uwilingiyamana Award for Innovators in Female Education, Zomba: Centre for Social Research, University of Malawi.

repetition policy was weak because it lacked the capacity to monitor repetition in schools. There was resistance at the school level from teachers and parents¹⁰. Teachers reportedly found the policy difficult to understand and failed to comprehend its goals. Poor systems of record management at the school and national level made it impossible to track down pupils within the system and monitor the implementation of the policy. The policy was successfully implemented in standard 8 because it was reinforced with selection procedures that discouraged multiple repetition.

iii. Age of entry

In order to enhance the possibility of girls staying longer in school and completing their primary education GABLE set new targets for entry age so as to tackle the problem of late entry into school which was then very common especially among rural children. Even though the official minimum recommended age of entry was 6, it was not uncommon to find children older than 16 years being admitted into standard one. This created very large age range of pupils in school and the resulting mixed age classes in turn posed great challenges such as discipline, variance in rates of learning, management of classrooms and delivery of lessons to suit different age groups. The policy set the minimum and maximum, age of entry into school to be 6 and 12 years. The policy had the potential of easing some of the problems faced in lower primary such as overcrowding that were believed to be contributing to the inefficiencies of the system as well as creating safer environments for girls by removing the threat posed by older boys in class. However given the absence of birth certificates and a functioning student registration system and lack of alternative education for overage pupils and absence of pre-school programmes for underage children the implementation of this policy was patchy.

iv. Social mobilisation campaign

To counter the widely held negative attitudes by the community and parents towards girls' education, the project component of GABLE supported a social mobilisation campaign (SMC). The SMC employed a person-to-person communication approach using participatory drama, workshops and focus group discussions. Through these strategies SMC assisted communities to identify local constraints to girls' education and helped them prepare action plans to overcome them.

The SMC was largely successful in identifying specific constraints to girls' education and raising awareness at the local level about the importance of girls' education. The SMC contributed to girls' access and persistence in school by empowering local communities identify local constraints to girls education and develop and implement local strategies to overcome the constraints. The methodology adopted by the SMC, which was participatory in nature accounts for the success of the SMC activities. Its emphasis on direct person-to-person communication, use of social change experts like local leaders, initiation counsellors helped mobilise communities into action. The success of SMC in mobilising communities has raised questions about its sustainability. For example, there were no plans in the project on how to respond to community plans if they required financial and technical assistance; SMC was not

¹⁰ Wolf J., G. Lang, L.L Bekett Mount, D. VanBelle-Prouty 1999, Where Policy Hits the Ground: Policy Implementation Processes in Malawi and Namibia, Sd Technical Paper No 95, USAID Bureau for Africa

supported by improvements in school quality. This had the potential of diminishing community enthusiasm, which was generated by the SMC activities.

C. Strategies to reduce gender bias in schools and increase the achievement of girls in schools.

Curricular reforms were introduced to reduce gender bias in schools by engendering the curriculum and textbooks and piloting the establishment of gender balanced community schools and improvements in the achievement of girls in some subjects through gender streaming.

i. Gender appropriate curriculum

Support was given to revise the primary school curriculum in order to make it gender sensitive. To this effect a Gender and Curriculum unit was established at the curriculum development centre. All primary school textbooks were revised to remove all gender biases. In addition the primary school teacher-training curriculum was also revised to make it gender sensitive and gender training offered to teacher trainers and primary school advisers. The unit was successful in influencing primary school level curriculum development because of the unit was able to take advantage of the on-going curriculum reform by ensuring that all the new textbooks and other learning materials that were being developed under the curriculum reform were made gender sensitive. Gender training materials were also developed and used for the training of curriculum developers and regional and district personnel (i.e. PEAs and DEOs). However there were serious gaps in the spread of the gender awareness training between the district personnel and the school level. Many teachers had not been reached by the district personnel (PEAs and DEOs) because of inadequate funds for training and the multiple roles PEAs had to fulfil which reduced their availability to conduct such training.

ii. Gender balanced community schools

Under the GABLE programme government committed itself to establish junior community primary schools on the basis of community participation in school management. The objectives of these schools were to reduce distance to school, which had been identified as a major constraint for girls in particular and to provide a gender balanced environment in schools with equal enrolment of boys and girls in all standards and with the provision of female teachers who would act as role models for the girls. The GABLE programme supported the Village Based Schools (VBS) run by an NGO, SCF US in order to pilot test the concept of gender balanced community schools and community participation. Though the VBS experiment produced positive results¹¹ the intervention was not scaled up to national level nor did they influence national policy in any significant way. Poor linkages with the Ministry of Education and other GABLE activities such as SMC and the Gender Appropriate Curriculum (GAC) were said to have contributed to the lack of impact beyond its pilot activities¹².

¹¹ Hyde K.A.L et al 1996 Village Based Schools in Mangochi Evaluation Report. Zomba: Centre for Educational Research and Training, University of Malawi.

¹² Bernbaum et al 1998, Evaluation of USAID/Malawi GABLE Program, Washington DC: Academy for Education Development

iii. Gender streaming maths lessons

One of the strategies proposed and pilot tested to improve the performance of girls in primary school was gender streaming. It was observed that the poor performance of girls in the Primary School Leaving Certificate Examination (PSLCE) was due to their poor performance in mathematics and science. One way of improving their performance in these two subjects was the introduction of single sex classes in mixed sex schools, a strategy that had been successfully tried at secondary school level¹³. GABLE supported a pilot of gender streaming maths classes at primary school level. However the pilot had little impact on classroom activities as it was seen in some quarters running counter to the existing attempts to convince people that boys and girls have similar abilities and needs. The approach was also seen as potentially difficult to implement because of the foreseen added administrative burden which would arise as a result of scheduling separate mathematics classes in a system that is already over-stretched – i.e. inadequate teachers and classrooms¹⁴.

D. System wide supporting reforms

As indicated earlier, a larger part of the GABLE programme focussed on policy reforms to improve the overall education system. It was felt that the problems facing the educational system such as low internal efficiency and low quality tended to negatively affect educational outcomes of girls more. Some of the policy reforms proposed were:

- Increasing budgetary resources to the education sector to 17% by 1997 and within education sector and increasing allocation to primary education to 62 % by 1997.
- Constructing more classrooms and teacher houses.
- Training more teachers by efficiently utilising teacher training colleges.
- Providing more learning materials to pupils through competitive procedures for procurement and distribution and increase budgetary resources to primary learning materials.

Apart from increasing budgetary resources to education and primary sub-sector the implementation of the other system wide reforms was less successful. The construction of more classroom blocks and teacher houses did not kept pace with enrolment increases, which in part were due to the school fee waivers and SMC activities. Training of teachers has also lagged behind the enrolment increases and the situation was exacerbated by the recruitment of 18,000 untrained teachers following the implementation of FPE in 1994. By 1997 budgetary allocation to the education sector had increased to 27% and the share of primary education increased to an all time high of 65%.

5. Lessons learned

¹³ Hyde, K.A.L. 1993, Gender streaming as a strategy for improving girls academic performance: evidence from Malawi, Zomba, Centre for Saocial Research, University of Malawi.

¹⁴ Bernabaum et al 1998 po cit

A number of lessons can be drawn from the experience of implementing reforms to improve girls' education in Malawi.

- The simultaneous implementation of multiple interventions contributed to the success of the girls' education programme. The success of the GABLE programme in impacting policy and effecting structural changes has been attributed to the to the simultaneous implementation of the wider package of reforms including for example, school fee waivers, school uniform, pregnancy policy, gender appropriate curriculum and the social mobilisation¹⁵.
- The dropout rates amongst girls have remained higher than of boys leading to lower completion rates despite the efforts to reduce the cost of educating girls and pupils in general. One of the main reason constantly coming up in research for dropout especially among girls is because of lack of appropriate clothes to wear to school suggesting that elimination of requirement for wearing uniform has not reduced the cost of educating girls significantly as was initially hoped. This points to the need to fully understand the private cost of schooling and analyse the contribution households make to the education of their children within the context of poverty assessment framework.
- There is need for meticulous planning and strategising for implementing complex policy reforms and programme such as scholarship programmes and reviewing of repetition and age of entry policies to avoid implementation pitfalls.
- Genuine community participation can yield results in programmes promoting female education especially in dealing with the cultural factors constraining girls' participation. In Malawi through the SMC activities attitudinal change was not imposed from outside but from within through building in local ownership by working with existing community key stakeholders such as chiefs, initiation counsellors, religious leaders and school committee.
- Building on existing local and international support for girls education can help change attitudes of conservative elements in ministries of education and also help mobilise political will. GABLE was launched at the time when there was a growing interest in girls' education both at the local level and at international level. Prior to the design of GABLE, women's groups in particular the National Commission on Women in Development (NCWID), spearheaded the debate on girls education and made several recommendations to government to improve the education of girls. During the design of GABLE recommendations made by NCWID formed the basis for identifying the programmes priorities. The 1990s was also a period when greater attention was paid to girls' education by the international community and this helped to motivate those in the ministry who created the reforms and also changed the attitudes of those in the ministry who were sceptical about the focus on girls education¹⁶.

6. Future challenges

¹⁵ *ibid*

¹⁶ Wolf 1998 Gender Issues in Bernabaum et al 1998 op cit

Despite the impressive achievements made by Malawi to achieve gender equity in primary education a number of challenges remain.

- The first challenge for Malawi is to regain the momentum on girls education created by GABLE which has partially been lost or has been made less visible as a result of recent focus on free primary education.
- School related gender violence is emerging as a serious constraint to girls' education and there is need to step up efforts to address SRGBV and make school safe environments for girls.
- Despite the gains in enrolments that have been made as a result of GABLE and FPE, poor retention and low achievement of girls have continued to undermine efforts to achieve gender equality and improve educational outcomes for girls. Therefore ensuring retention of girls until they complete primary education and their achievement while at the same time improving the quality and relevance of education will remain serious challenges for the foreseeable future.