

Policy Paper on "Advancing Equity in Education: Empowering Girls and Children with Disabilities for Sustainable Development"

1.0. Background Information

Globally, girls' education continues to face significant barriers despite international efforts. According to UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report (2022), over 130 million girls are out of school worldwide, with the majority residing in Sub-Saharan Africa. An estimated 9 million girls of primary school age will never set foot in a classroom, compared to 3 million boys. Additionally, girls face higher dropout rates due to early marriage, gender-based violence, and poverty. In regions like Sub-Saharan Africa, only 66% of girls complete primary education, while just 34% transition to secondary school. The global literacy rate for young women stands at 87%, compared to 92% for young men, illustrating a persistent gender gap. Investments in girls' education yield significant returns—educated women are more likely to participate in the workforce, reduce poverty, and improve health outcomes for their families and communities.

In Malawi, the situation mirrors these global trends. According to the 2023 Malawi Education Statistics Report, 48% of the 5.3 million primary school children enrolled are girls. However, the dropout rate among girls, especially in upper primary grades, is alarming, with 20% of girls leaving school before completion. The completion rate for girls in primary education is just 48%, and only 46.5% of them transition to secondary education. At the secondary school level, girls continue to face barriers such as socio-economic challenges, lack of access to menstrual hygiene facilities, and early marriages, with 42% of girls married before the age of 18. Furthermore, only 3% of eligible girls transition to higher learning institutions, which reflects the urgent need for interventions to improve their access to education.

The 2023 Education Sector Performance Report (ESPR, 2023) highlights a concerning pupil-to-teacher ratio of 102.5:1, significantly exceeding the recommended 60:1. This situation is further complicated by a severe shortage of special needs teachers, limiting the support available for children requiring additional assistance. In the 2023/24 financial year, the government allocated MWK 0.75 billion for procuring assistive devices for both primary and secondary education; however, by March, only 56% of this amount had been disbursed. Moreover, the enrollment of students with disabilities in public universities remains alarmingly low, with only 155 individuals enrolling in the 2023/24 academic year, reflecting significant accessibility challenges. The lack of disability-friendly facilities continues to hinder their educational experiences, undermining efforts to promote diversity and inclusivity (CSEC, 2023).

The overall primary school enrollment stands at approximately 5.3 million, with girls making up 48% of this figure. However, the situation deteriorates as students progress to upper primary classes (Standards 5-8), where the dropout rate for girls reaches 20%. The completion rate for primary education is currently at 48%, while the transition rate to secondary education is 46.5%. Alarmingly, only 3% of eligible candidates proceed to institutions of higher learning.

In the 2024/25 national budget, notable increases were made in allocations for Special Needs Education (SNE). The SNE Department in basic education received MK 1.1 billion, an increase of 47% from the previous allocation of MK 0.7 billion. However, despite this increase, funding remains insufficient to fully address the needs of learners with disabilities. Montfort College, responsible for training special needs teachers, saw an increase in its allocation from MK 400 million to MK 488 million, but this remains inadequate to accommodate meaningful enrollment. Additionally, MK 150 million was set aside for training 150 SNE teachers at Machinga Teacher Training College (TTC) through Open and Distance eLearning (ODeL), which, though positive, still falls short of the demand.

The government aims to provide bursaries to 45,000 students, with an allocation of MK 1 billion under the six Education Divisions, but this too is insufficient given the demand for such financial support. The disparities in access to bursaries and other essential resources continue to hamper the education of girls and learners with disabilities, requiring urgent attention.

2.0. Policy Recommendations

2.1 Recommendations for Girls' Education

- 1) **Increase Budget Allocation for Education to at least 20% from the current 14.8%, prioritizing Girls and Children with Disabilities**
 - a) Advocate for fiscal discipline and accountability in the use of the budget. Timely disbursement, efficient utilization, and regular monitoring are essential for maximizing the impact of resources.
 - b) Strengthen domestic revenue mobilization to reduce reliance on donor funding. Address illicit financial flows, which cost the government MK 1.2 trillion annually, to increase available resources for education.
 - c) Ensure resource allocation reflects the diverse needs of the education sector, with adequate funding for Early Childhood Development (ECD), Special Needs Education (SNE), and vocational training.
- 2) **Strengthen Policies on Special Needs Education and Early Marriage Prevention**
 - a) Push for the swift approval of the Inclusive Education Policy, currently at Cabinet level.
 - b) Enforce the implementation of the Marriage, Divorce, and Family Relations Act (2015) and Constitutional Amendment (2017), aimed at reducing early marriages and pregnancy, which disproportionately affect girls' education.
- 3) **Enhance School Infrastructure for Girls and Children with Disabilities**
 - a) Ensure oversight functions enforce compliance with construction standards to make schools disability- and girl-friendly, including separate sanitation facilities for both girls and children with disabilities.

2.2 Recommendations for Special Needs Education (SNE)

- 4) **Early Identification of Learners with Disabilities**
 - a) Implement comprehensive screening programs at ECD centers to identify children with disabilities early and provide training to caregivers to recognize signs of disabilities.
 - b) Develop integrated health and education systems to ensure timely support for children with disabilities. Disability information should be documented in health passports to facilitate educational planning.
 - c) Align ECD and Inclusive Education policies to provide cohesive support for children with disabilities from an early age.
 - d) Ensure the effective implementation of the new education curriculum by including materials like braille and digital resources for children with disabilities. Train teachers on how to use these materials.
 - e) Strengthen parental and community involvement to support children with disabilities and counter harmful cultural practices that hinder their access to education.
- 5) **Promote Community Engagement in Special Needs and Girls' Education**
 - a) Encourage local communities to participate in school governance and decision-making processes to prioritize special needs and girls' education.
 - b) Raise awareness in constituencies on the value of inclusive education for girls and children with disabilities through community engagement and advocacy campaigns.

3.0. Conclusion

Addressing the educational challenges faced by girls and children with disabilities in Malawi requires a comprehensive approach. By increasing the education budget to at least 20% and ensuring efficient resource allocation, the government can better support vulnerable populations. Strengthening the enforcement of laws against early marriage, enhancing school infrastructure, and implementing screening programs for early identification of disabilities will create safer and more accessible learning environments. Engaging communities and raising awareness about the importance of inclusive education will foster a supportive atmosphere for all learners. These measures will empower every child, contribute to equitable educational opportunities, and support Malawi's broader development goals.

References

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