



Knowledge hub
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Collection of best practices

Summary of the best practice

1. Title of the best practice (e.g. name of policy, programme, project, etc.) *

Girls' secondary education in Malawi: gender in and beyond education

2. Country or countries where the practice is implemented *

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3. Please select the **most relevant** Action Track(s) the best practice applies to *

- Action Track 1. Inclusive, equitable, safe, and healthy schools
- Action Track 2. Learning and skills for life, work, and sustainable development
- Action Track 3. Teachers, teaching and the teaching profession
- Action Track 4. Digital learning and transformation
- Action Track 5. Financing of education

4. Implementation lead/partner organization(s) *

European Commission - Directorate General for International Partnerships

5. Key words (5-15 words): Please add key descriptive words around aims, modalities, target groups etc. *

girls' secondary education; gender mainstreaming; gender targeted; re-admission; early marriage; SRGBV; bicycles; bursaries; menstrual hygiene management; girls' clubs, mothers' groups; community networking

6. What makes it a best practice? *

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Description of the best practice

7. Introduction (350-400 words)

This section should ideally provide the context of, and justification for, the practice and address the following issues:

- i) Which population was affected?
- ii) What was the problem that needed to be addressed?
- iii) Which approach was taken and what objectives were achieved? *

The EU programme Improving Secondary Education in Malawi (ISEM I and II) has two main objectives: (1) improving access to secondary education through upgraded, safe school facilities, bursaries and bicycles for Community Day Secondary Schools (CDSS), and (2) improving quality in secondary education through new curriculum, syllabus and materials, and improving teacher training, decentralised school management, and community involvement in school improvement. Between 2016 and 2019, improved access was achieved in the reduction of classroom to student ratios from 1:61 to 1:47, a 31% increase in enrolment: 37% for girls and 24% for boys, and a reduction in dropout from 7.4% to 3.8%. Improved quality was achieved through nearly 6,000 teachers oriented on the new curriculum and continuing professional development (CPD) for all the CDSS supported by the programme.

ISEM targets both boys and girls and gender equality is a significant, but not its primary, objective. Nonetheless, ISEM takes a gender transformative approach to target girls' access to secondary education in predominantly rural areas of Malawi, using a combination of gender mainstreaming and gender targeted initiatives to effect change within schools, school systems, and the community.

The gender aspects of the programme address key barriers that prevent most girls in rural communities in Malawi from completing their secondary education. These include long and unsafe journeys to school, unsafe boarding arrangement for girls and the lack of menstrual hygiene facilities. When coupled with the inability of poor households to pay school fees, harmful gender norms, high rates of school related gender based violence (SRGBV), and little awareness about sexual health and reproductive rights, these barriers explain why 54% of secondary age girls are out of school (Oxfam) and the current secondary school completion rate for girls is 20% (Ministry of Education, MOE).

School dropout rates for girls, particularly those aged 14- 15, are often because of teenage pregnancy and early marriage, which increased by 18% during Covid school closures. In a recent national poll conducted through the EU-UN Spotlight Initiative, 64% reported child marriage as commonplace in their area. MOE revised its readmission policy in 2018 to enable pregnant girls and young mothers to complete their education but many girls still feel too stigmatised to return.

As a result of these factors, few women become teachers, community leaders or members of Boards of Governors or Parent Teacher Associations. Women do not have a voice in promoting gender equality in the school environment, school improvement plan or grant, or who should get school bursaries or bicycles. A lack of women teachers means adolescent girls do not have counsellors or role models to support them.

8. Implementation (350-450 words)

Please describe the implementation modalities or processes, where possible in relation to:

- i) What are the main activities carried out?
- ii) When and where the activities were carried out (including the start date and whether it is ongoing)?
- iii) Who were the key implementation actors and collaborators? (civil society organizations, private sector, foundations, coalitions, networks etc.)?
- iv) What were the resources needed (budget and sources) for the implementation?

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Improving Secondary Education in Malawi (ISEM) I and II are financed by the EU and jointly managed by the Ministry of Education (MOE) and the EU.

ISEM I, €36m, 2016 – 2021 provided support for teacher training and school governance in all Community Day Secondary Schools (CDSSs) in 6 districts in Malawi where girls' dropout rates are the highest. 22 of these CDSSs were also targeted with infrastructure support, student bursaries, and mentoring sessions on life skills and Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights. Key implementers and collaborators for the gender components of the programme were Edukans Foundation, Education Expertise Development Foundation Malawi (EEDF), Centre for Youth Empowerment and Civic Education, Teacher's Union of Malawi (TUM), Girl's Empowerment Network (GENET), Oxfam, Centre for Alternatives for Victimized Women and Children, and Foundation for Irrigation and Sustainable Development (FISD).

ISEM II, €55m, 2022- 27 is a continuation of ISEM I and will support MOE to scale up the programme's infrastructure interventions in a further 6 districts for a further 40 CDSSs, while the teacher training and governance components will be scaled up to all CDSSs.

Although ISEM targets both boys and girls, the best practice described here is how activities within the programme supported girls' secondary education in Malawi in and beyond education. They can be summarised as follows.

- Refurbished classrooms reduce class size and make gender responsive, learner centred pedagogy possible.
- Newly constructed or refurbished toilets and changing rooms help girls manage their menstrual hygiene.
- Bursaries for school fees, meals, textbooks, school uniforms and equipment keep students from dropping out of school and entering child marriages.
- Bicycles help girls and other vulnerable students deal with the long unaccompanied journeys to school, reducing dropout due to accumulated missed morning lessons, physical stress, and SRGBV.
- The implementation of gender responsive pedagogy ensures gender equal classrooms and the reduction of gender stereotypes in teaching materials.
- Counselling centres, reporting and referral mechanisms in targeted schools and strategies for reducing SRGBV create a safe learning environment for girls.
- Girls' clubs, such as the World Starts With Me, teach girls about life skills, menstrual hygiene management, and sexual reproductive health and rights, strengthening girls' self-esteem and empowering them not only to stay in school but also to become leaders.
- Training for mothers' groups and male champions of change, school management committees and PTAs ensures schools uphold gender related by-laws and re-admission policies for pregnant girls and young mothers and provides mothers' groups with counselling skills to persuade young mothers to return to school.
- Working with traditional leaders helps them challenge negative social norms, promote girls' education, and implement gender transformative by-laws around education and early marriage.

9. Results – outputs and outcomes (250-350 words)

To the extent possible, please reply to the questions below:

- i) How was the practice identified as transformative? (e.g., impact on policies, impact on management processes, impact on delivery arrangements or education monitoring, impact on teachers, learners and beneficiary communities etc.);
- ii) What were the concrete results achieved with regard to outputs and outcomes?
- iii) Has an assessment of the practice been carried out? If yes, what were the results? *

The synergy of the various gender components of the ISEM programme is what makes it best practice. ISEM has been transformative in the way gender mainstreamed and gender targeted action has had a positive impact for girls and women in school, in school systems and in school communities in Malawi.

The EU and MOE final evaluations of ISEM I and the continuation and scaling up of ISEM II to 40 schools in 12 districts by 2027 describe the following gender transformative impacts.

22 refurbished Community Day Secondary Schools in Kasungu, Dowa, Mchinji, Lilongwe, Balaka and Phalombe districts provide access and safe learning environments through hostels with matron's houses, practical, safe and dignified WASH facilities for girls to manage menstrual hygiene, plus 12 of the schools with counselling services and SRGBV reporting and referral systems. Girls report a sense of prestige in attending; CDSS were previously considered second rate but students and teachers are prouder and more motivated to be associated with them now. A 37% increase in girls' enrolment in ISEM 1 supported CDSSs (24% for boys) verifies this. During ISEM I, 1500 girls were empowered with a better understanding of their sexual health and reproductive rights and leadership training, 2585 girls got bursaries (76% of the 3400 made available) and 1166 girls and vulnerable boys got bicycles. As a result, the dropout rate in ISEM supported CDSSs has halved from 7.6% to 3.8% in ISEM supported CDSSs for boys and girls. Success stories include testimonies of self-awareness, communication and active citizenship skills that have helped girls overcome disability, bullying and poverty-induced low self-esteem. In Chilanga, Chibanzi and Sopa CDSSs, girls went on to become head girls, climate justice ambassadors, Youth Parliament representatives and activists for ending gender based violence. In many other cases girls have broken family precedent and gone on to business, teaching and higher education.

In terms of sustainable funding for bursaries after the end of ISEM I, school stakeholders in Chembera CDSS and Chisugulu CDSS created Village Savings and Loans groups to support vulnerable students' school and national exam fees. Kochilira CDSS successfully lobbied their local MP for continuing bursaries from the constituency development fund. The school community from Nkhande CDSS grow cereals for a school breakfast programme and their mother's group runs a small commercial farm to pay for school fees and equipment.

81 teen mothers and out-of-school girls were brought back to school with advocacy and support from 12 mothers' groups, male champions, 20 new, sustainable by-laws supporting gender equal education, and 100 trained traditional and community leaders. In CDSS Mpilisi, the mother's group, male change champions and school counsellors worked together across traditional gender divides for the first time to return 12 girls to school who had dropped out because of pregnancy and school fees. In addition, the only woman Group Village Head in Phalombe District, developed 6 by-laws to protect girls' education from early marriage in Khongoloni CDSS.

Mothers themselves have become empowered through this advocacy and re-admission work and some have gone on to work in community and national gender equality advocacy groups.

10. Lessons learnt (300 words)

To the extent possible, please reply to the following questions:

- i) What were the key triggers for transformation?
- ii) What worked really well – what facilitated this?
- iii) What did not work – why did it not work? *

Triggers for transformation and what worked well

The timing of MOE's 2017 circular, 'Making our pupils safe from School related Gender Based Violence' and their 2018 revision of the school re-admission policy enabled ISEM to bring the policy from the page to the public. MOE buy-in to scaling up ISEM I to II was triggered by the quality and cost effectiveness of the programme, especially the decentralisation for more effective school management and the cluster system of school-based, self-sustaining communities of practice for in-service teacher training.

The project design targeted vulnerable boys and girls, mutually reinforcing school infrastructure development with school human resource development. Interestingly, when implemented, it disproportionately advantaged girls. This happened through a variety of top down and bottom up, school based and system based, gender mainstreamed and gender targeted interventions. What worked well was this holistic approach. Interlocking pathways from school construction to school counselling led to improved retention and completion rates in girls' secondary education and the success stories of real individuals.

Working with a range of community stakeholders (School Management Committees, mothers' groups, male champions, traditional leaders, school leaders and teachers) built community awareness and skills in implementing school re-admission policy for girls who had dropped out. The opportunities created by ISEM for school stakeholders to network across traditional divides produced local gender transformative by-laws to protect girls from SRGBV and harmful gender norms, as well as sustainable funding arrangements for bursaries and school improvement beyond the life of the programme.

What can be improved

Where best practice can be improved is in the way gender responsive teaching methodology and teaching materials are promoted in the programme's continuing professional development (CPD) component. Currently, there is only one session on gender responsive pedagogy in the Secondary CPD Participatory Teaching Methods Guide. It focuses on identifying gender bias in the textbooks in a limited way but misses the opportunity to link gender responsive pedagogy with the way it advocates mainstreaming inclusion of special education needs and critical thinking – something it could easily do. Meanwhile, outside school, girls' clubs do a much better job of empowering girls and giving them life skills. The same messages should be included in the CPD Participatory Teaching Methods Guide with examples of how to reinforce these skills in the classroom itself, through mainstreaming gender equality in teaching and learning science, maths, literacy and second language.

It takes time and support for teachers to apply gender transformative concepts effectively to the often restrictive school curriculum and for real behavioural change in classroom methodology to take place. This means teacher training and CPD should go deeper into the methodology of how girls' voice and empowerment can be increased through gender transformative classroom management and gender responsive assessment, and how sexual rights and reproductive health messages can be inserted into the teaching and learning of civics, history, biology, and English. In addition, CPD should include supervised or peer supported teaching practice, materials development and structured lesson plans to ensure gender equality messages are mainstreamed in this way on a regular basis.

11. Conclusions (250 words)

Please describe why may this intervention be considered a “best practice”. What recommendations can be made for those intending to adopt the documented “best practice” or how can it help people working on the same issue(s)? *

1. When a programme has women’s and girls’ empowerment as a significant but not primary objective (as ISEM does), it can have as much if not more impact on improving the access and quality of girls’ education as a specifically girl-focused intervention. It does not take an exclusive approach to alleviate exclusion. As such, ISEM I’s success and ISEM II’s scaling up is an exponent of recent research that supports school interventions intended for all students that disproportionately advantage girls (Evans and Yaun. 2019. What We Learn about Girls’ Education from Interventions that Do Not Focus on Girls).

2. All the components of gender transformative education interlock. Therefore, a holistic approach using a variety of interlocking interventions is necessary. This includes combining gender mainstreaming and gender targeted interventions and working at school level, system level and community level (‘in and beyond’ education), especially when they are so closely interlinked in decentralised, community-driven education systems.

3. Part of this holistic approach to gender transformative education is to ensure that traditionally trained teachers get more thorough and sustainable support for implementing gender responsive pedagogy. CPD should enable teachers to assign roles and responsibilities that empower girls as well as boys, and get students to think critically about gender through the way they learn literacy, numeracy, science, civics and second languages. CPD should also include more practical techniques and tasks, learner-centred classroom management, and concrete examples in lesson plans and materials, for mainstreaming gender equality through the examined subjects in the curriculum.

12. Further reading

Please provide a list and URLs of key reference documents for additional information on the “best practice” for those who may be interested in knowing how the results benefited the beneficiary group/s. *

Cavwoc. Website accessed Jun 2022. ISEM 1. Centre for Alternatives for Victimized Women and Children (cavwoc.org)

Edukans. EU. 2020. Stories of change. Her Education Her Right (HEHR)

EU. 2021. Final Evaluation of Improving Secondary Education in Malawi (ISEM I) Programme. Related information available at: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/malawi/improving-secondary-education-malawi-isem-phase-1_en?s=107

Evans, DK and Yuan, F. 2019. What We Learn about Girls' Education from Interventions that Do Not Focus on Girls. Centre for Global development 2019. Working paper 513. Available from <https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/what-we-learn-about-girls-education-interventions-do-not-focus-on-girls.pdf>

Malawi Government. 2018. Readmission policy for primary and secondary schools. Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. Available at <https://cse-learning-platform-unesco.org/system/files/digital-library-files/REVISED%20READMISSION%20POLICY%20MAY%20%202018%20%282%29.pdf>

MOE 2020. Improving Secondary Education in Malawi (ISEM). Final Implementation Report Oxfam in Malawi. EU. 2020. Girl Power: securing the future of girls through education. A collection of case studies. Related material available at

https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/malawi/isem-creating-safe-learning-environment-female-and-other-vulnerable-students_en

Oxfam GB video. Bicycles beat poverty. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NwcnfSGXoWM>

Spotlight Initiative Bulletin 2020. Malawi Country Programme Official Newsletter. Available at <https://malawi.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-07/Spotlight%20Newsletter%20-%20July%202020.pdf>