



Girls' Education in Malawi

Why it matters and how the Mamie Martin Fund helps

Executive summary

This report is based on an MSc dissertation undertaken in 2020 by Anna Freidenfeld while on placement with the Mamie Martin Fund (MMF). It sets out findings from published and 'grey'¹ literature about why girls' education is important and why girls face more difficulties in completing their education than boys in the same families and communities.

- Malawi is one of the poorest countries in the world with a huge number of orphans, who face particular barriers to education. Malawian orphans are 50 percent less likely to go to school than children with both parents living.
- Child marriage is a serious problem in Malawi and orphan girls are particularly vulnerable to this practice. Once married, a girl almost never returns to school.
- Many girls arrive at the school to which they have been selected without any fees, just hoping they will be allowed entry.
- In addition to poverty, there are numerous cultural barriers to girls' school attendance in Malawi.
- Analysis of data about MMF beneficiaries showed that barriers to secondary school include tuition fees, disabilities, a lack of money for other necessities and the girls' family situations. Girls, in particular, lack many of the essentials of school life such as school uniforms, bags and maths instruments. The MMF provides for some

¹ 'Grey' literature refers to information which is useful to the topic in hand but is either unpublished or has been published in non-commercial or non-academic form.

of these needs through the 'Ready to Learn' fund, distributed by the Malawian Manager at her discretion

- Analysis of MMF's records between 2014 and 2019 indicated that 81% of supported girls successfully completed secondary school. This figure compares very favourably with the most recent Malawi-wide data about school completion which stood at just 21% in 2013 (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2013). These figures suggest that MMF's support significantly increases completion rates for the selected girls, who were selected on the basis of need, not academic ability.
- Freidenfeld (2020: 52) found that 'the best approaches to overcome education barriers in Northern Malawi tend to be more holistic, combining multiple tactics and recognising the different education barriers faced by different individuals'. The MMF strategy seems effective; MMF combines the payment of school fees and support for necessities with the moral support of the Malawi manager who develops a relationship with each of the MMF girls through termly visits to each school.
- MMF's key 'education enablers' are
 - Diversity of partnership - MMF works across three partners in Malawi
 - Addressing complex needs - MMF provides a 'Ready to Learn' fund which is used locally to meet specific needs, including that of sanitary wear
 - The role of the Malawi Manager incorporates mentoring and pastoral support of the pupils
 - Most of the schools supported by MMF are in rural areas and girls are helped with travel expenses when needed.

- Freidenfeld made several recommendations as to ways in which NGOs could try to ensure that their work has a longer-lasting impact.
 - By extending support to children in primary school, NGOs could assist in further promoting educational equity
 - To go beyond a solely mitigating role, NGOs require to build partnerships with communities as well as schools, working towards breaking down gender inequalities and promoting a more inclusive, empowering approach to girls' education, including that of excluded groups, including children with disabilities
 - Partnership working would be greatly improved if there were better communication channels between beneficiaries, their parents, MMF, and key partners in Scotland and Malawi. Although MMF has been active in finding effective ways to communicate using smart phones and messaging services, there remain significant problems in the current infrastructure, especially in rural areas where mobile phone signal and internet access are particularly poor (Porter et al., 2012).

- Specific recommendations to the MMF were:
 - In order to assist girls to secure apprenticeships, vocational training and higher education opportunities, MMF could build on their successful partnership with the Soko Fund which gives university bursaries to 63 women (currently 0 including five who had been funded by MMF at school)
 - MMF could also build on the mentoring and support role embodied in the work of the Malawian manager in order to increase liaisons with parents/guardians, so that they too can act as community-based mentors and role models.

Introduction

The Mamie Martin Fund (MMF) was established in 1993, based on an historic connection between Scotland and North Malawi, to support girls' education at secondary schools in that part of Malawi. The focus on girls' secondary schooling was identified by local colleagues as being the educational area of most need in Malawi. It is widely accepted nowadays that girls' education is fundamental to the development of a nation. It is important that NGOs base their work on evidence of effectiveness. In order to ensure that MMF's work is evidence-based, and to update its knowledge in the area, the organisation hosted an MSc student from the University of Edinburgh in 2020. Anna Freidenfeld undertook a literature review of the subject area as well as research into the outcomes of MMF's work as part of her dissertation. This report presents and shares Anna's findings and recommendations in relation to MMF's work.

Malawian Context



Figure 1 Malawi's location

Access to education was unequal between girls and boys when Mamie Martin lived in Malawi one hundred years ago. While things have improved, there remain marked educational inequalities for many children in Malawi. The absence of one or both parents is a strong indicator of extreme poverty and disadvantage, including lack of

access to education.

Orphaned children

In 2019, there were approximately 500,000 orphans in Malawi whose parents had died due to HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS, 2019). As Kidman & Heymann (2009) argue, orphaned children often face more barriers to

education than children with both living parents. The number of paternal orphans in Malawi is higher than the number of maternal orphans; this is likely to be due to 'sex differentials in HIV infection and survival times', but also because fathers are on average older than mothers (Hosegood et al., 2007: 333). Furthermore, single parent households tend to face more extreme poverty than two-parent families and thus children are more likely to have to contribute to household income (Milazzo & Van de Walle, 2017; Cheung, 2015; Roman, 2011). The number of minor-headed households throughout sub-Saharan Africa has significantly increased since the HIV/AIDS epidemic (Ciganda et al., 2012). Sadly, there are more orphans in Malawi's most economically disadvantaged communities; children who already struggle with poverty as a barrier to education are also more likely to face the barriers presented by not having parents, creating a 'cycle of vulnerability' (Lingenfelter et al., 2017: 151). As Moeller (2013) notes, education itself plays an important part in HIV/AIDS prevention. Moeller's study in Nigeria found that women with a primary level education were better equipped to safeguard against Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs) than those without any education, and those with a secondary level education were far more likely to actively practice family planning.

Kidman et al. (2012) found that Malawian orphans are 50 percent less likely to go to school than children from two parent families. Similarly, children whose parents are ill with HIV/AIDS are more likely to regularly miss school than those with healthy parents (Floyd et al., 2007). Such children often have to find employment to support themselves and other dependents (Hosegood et al., 2007). Illustrating this, the MMF's database reports that one girl had worked as a cleaner to pay for her school fees before beginning MMF support. Her father had died and her mother was unable to work, so finding employment herself was the only way she could afford school (MMF Records, 2020). Arguably, by 'investing' in orphaned girls' education and enabling them to attend school, NGOs can

help push them out of the 'cycle of vulnerability', or 'poverty trap' (Sachs, 2005; Easterly, 2006).

Child marriage

International Law defines a 'child' as a person younger than eighteen years old. Using this definition, Malawi has one of the highest child marriage rates in the world (Human Rights Watch, 2014) and young girls are 'disproportionately affected' compared to adolescent boys (Bailey-King, 2018: n.p.). Devastatingly, many girls see marrying young as the only route out of poverty (Human Rights Watch, 2014). Young marriage among orphans is common because the poverty they experience is so extreme that often older siblings must find a way to support a large number of dependents (Filipovic, 2014). Once married, girls are unlikely to return to school, thereby compounding their disadvantage.

Poverty

In 2016, 69.9 percent of Malawi's population were living on less than US\$1.90 per day (International Development Association, 2017: 2). Thus, it is unsurprising that many households struggle to afford school fees (Morgan et al., 2014). There is also a nexus between gender and poverty (Spiker, 2019). For example, married couples in Malawi often move in with the woman's family and this regularly results in husbands insisting that their wife's family pay for schooling. It is often impossible to pay for the secondary education of all children (Mansfield, 2014). When finances are low, boys' education is often prioritised as patriarchal norms assign them a higher social status (Spiker, 2019).

Gender

A study by economists revealed that 'gender bias in children's resource shares' within households is not uncommon in Malawi (Dunbar et al., 2013: 469). Girls are also expected to contribute more to domestic work than boys and thus the 'opportunity costs' of sending them to school –

that is, the loss felt by losing an extra worker – is higher (Herz & Sperling, 2004: 49). As sociologists Williams et al. (2015: 931) state, limited financial resources comprise only one aspect of poverty and there are many 'hidden costs' to education besides school fees. Indeed, a shortage of soap and adequate clothing also constitute barriers to education (Funkquist et al., 2007). Therefore, it is unsurprising that removing tuition fees often fails to prevent school dropout (Kendal, 2006).

State funding

The Malawian state's allocation of funding to education is greatly imbalanced (Watkins & Ashforth, 2019). The quantity of resources given to students from the poorest families amounts to less than 10 percent of the total allocated to the richest, and the majority is spent on subsidising university level education. Consequently, the cost of sending children to school disproportionately burdens poorer families (Gruber & Kosack, 2014). Watkins & Ashforth (2019) find the biggest reason behind children dropping out of primary school in rural Malawi to be the repetition of school years, which is mandatory if a pupil fails exams, as it became unaffordable for parents. As secondary school already requires the payment of tuition fees, irrespective of repetition, it is unsurprising that parents may consider it too costly.

Children with disabilities

Banks & Zuurmond (2015) argue that children with disabilities are especially susceptible to poverty as a result of marginalisation from education, societal stigmatisation and chronic health problems, such as gradually deteriorating hearing, which are costly to manage. Poverty and deprivation are more extreme among the girls at Embangweni School for Deaf Children than in many of the other schools supported by MMF. Girls with disabilities face barriers to education that go beyond the purely

financial. MMF's Malawi manager reports that there is a lack of understanding in some communities about disabilities:

'...they don't understand that such kind of a person can achieve whatever anyone else can.' (Freidenfeld, 2020: 20)

The work of the Mamie Martin Fund



Figure 2
Hellena Zimba with her MMF bag

Secondary education is central to development because it is important at the individual level, increasing an individuals' 'capacities and opportunities' and their ability to choose a life they desire (Saito, 2003: 17). Education stands as an 'end of development' in itself because of its power to enhance individual capability (Sen, 1999: 37), and this also has impacts at the societal level as it allows people to 'contribute to the social good' (Walker & Unterhalter 2007: 8). 'Removing tuition fees isn't the same as making school free' as it fails to consider the 'hidden costs' of education (Williams et al., 2015: 931). Indeed, the cost of school supplies in Malawi is often 'higher than the amount required for fees' (Kadzamira & Rose, 2003: 506).

The Mamie Martin Fund exists to support girls' secondary education in North Malawi. To this end it pays school fees through partners in Malawi. Those partners are the CCAP Synod of Livingstonia, the RC Diocese of Karonga and Mchengautuba Community Day Secondary School. Money is sent directly to these partners to cover the fees of those girls selected to receive MMF bursaries - that selection being made at school level on the basis of need alone. As noted in the literature about educational need, students, particularly girls, lack many of the essentials of school life such as school uniforms, bags and maths instruments. They also lack sanitary

wear, soap and other personal items. The need for these school supplies is great because they are expensive and are considered to be luxury items in most Malawian households. Understandably, poor households cannot prioritise buying new uniforms and calculators, for example, when they are struggling to afford essential resources like food and medicine (Zimmerman, 2005). The MMF provides for some of these needs through the 'Ready to Learn' fund, distributed by the Malawian Manager at her discretion.



Figure 3 Practical needs of MMF pupils

The demand for travel money, needed for the journey to and from school, is likely to be higher in rural regions of Malawi as secondary schools are often very far from students' homes (Laurie, 2015). The MMF's database reports that one girl was only able to make the journey to BAGSS because her 'community gave her transport' (MMF Records, 2020: n.p.). Moreover, while travel is an issue for girls at boarding schools, it presents even more of a barrier to girls at day schools; one MMF student walked eight kilometres to school and back every day. Evidently, especially in rural areas, both means for travel and travel money are important education enablers. The Ready to Learn Fund helps with these needs but is, of course, limited by the resources available to MMF.

What difference does this support make - and how?

The positive outcomes for individuals and nations arising from investing in girls' education beyond primary school are well established. Secondary education is central to development because it increases students' capacity to make their own life choices and to access employment (Lingenfelter et al., 2017; Saito, 2003). At a nation level, supporting girls' education by increasing productivity and reducing birth rates creates a 'ripple effect', impacting on future generations and ultimately decreasing poverty (Moeller, 2013). Whether they wish to study to a higher level, earn an income, or focus on being a mother, access to education has the potential to enhance women's decision making power and assertiveness at the individual, household, and community-scale (Laurie, 2015).



Figure 4 Education barriers for MMF pupils

Poverty is currently the overarching issue preventing girls from enrolling in and completing secondary education in Northern Malawi (Mkandawire et al., 2013; Freidenfeld, 2020). Yet, within the complex web that is poverty lie innumerable obstacles to education. The data which Freidenfeld analysed indicate that the barriers exist on a wider scale, highlighting that gender and socioeconomic inequality within education persists in Malawi. The specific barriers Freidenfeld found within the MMF

data included tuition fees; disabilities; a lack of resources; and family situation.

The MMF's database of the students reveals that many girls arrive at school without any fees, just hoping they will be allowed entry. Unfortunately, those who do this are sent home and told not to return until their parents/guardians pay the fees (MMF Records, 2020). Watkins & Ashforth (2019: 16) found this to be a common practice in other parts of Malawi too, with many students also having their 'exam results withheld' until the fees were paid. It follows that the payment of tuition fees by NGOs enables girls to attend secondary school when financial constraints would otherwise have prevented enrolment.

Freidenfeld's (2020) analysis found that 81% of MMF-supported girls successfully completed secondary school. This figure compares very favourably with the most recent Malawi-wide data about school completion which stood at just 21% in 2013 (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2013). Freidenfeld concluded that MMF's support significantly increases completion rates for the selected girls, who were selected on the basis of need, not academic ability.

Her research also suggested that effective strategies to reduce barriers to schooling have to go further than meeting school fees; they must also address the hidden costs of education (Herz & Sperling, 2004).

Freidenfeld's analysis suggested that the most effective approaches to overcome education barriers in North Malawi are holistic, combining multiple tactics, recognising and responding to the challenges faced by different individuals. The research highlighted a number of ways in which MMF's varied strategies are addressing the barriers that girls encounter in accessing and sustaining an education. Freidenfeld identified six of MMF's key 'education enablers' as:

- **Diversification:** MMF’s establishment of partnerships with a range of day and boarding schools with variable resource levels in rural and urban areas recognises the considerable differences in educational opportunity experienced in different communities. Freidenfeld pointed to the importance of MMF’s recent support of sixteen girls at Mchengautuba CDSS in a deprived area of Mzuzu as an example of the organisation’s role in addressing the needs of marginalised communities. Moreover, because the tuition fees at this day school are significantly lower than at boarding schools, MMF’s resources can be used to support more girls than would otherwise be possible.
- **Addressing difference and inequality:** The Ready to Learn Fund provides resources on an individual, needs-led basis, so helping to address socioeconomic exclusion and the unequal starting points experienced by different girls (Sen, 1999)
- **Providing sanitary wear:** MMF’s relationship with Supreme Malawi, which employs local women to manufacture sustainable and reusable sanitary pads, preventing girls from missing school during menstruation, is seen as an important step towards dismantling the education barriers related to period poverty.



Figure 5 Staff at Supreme Malawi making reusable sanitary wear

- **The role of the Malawi manager:** The employment of a manager permanently based in Malawi was identified as a key education enabler. Freidenfeld stressed that NGOs aiming to empower women should emulate that empowerment within their own structures (Handy & Kassam, 2006: 69), enabling local women, such as MMF's manager, to become 'agents of change and decision- making' (Duraiappah et al., 2005: 3).



Figure 6 Mercy Sibande, MMF Malawi Manager

- **Addressing child marriage and pregnancy:** The Malawian manager plays an important role in following up girls who do not return to school, but girls who drop out of school due to pregnancy or child marriage are often very difficult to trace, partly due to the illegality of child marriage and the stigma attached to pregnancy. However, the research concluded that funded access to education can increase girls' agency and ability to make informed decisions. Past research in Africa, including Malawi, confirms that increased access to education often positively correlates with decreased marriage age and reduced adolescent pregnancy (Koski et al., 2018).
- **Considering geographical context:** Living in a rural area and having to travel long distances to school can act as a barrier to girls' education. The research identifies the importance of MMF's provision of travel money to students, enabling girls from remote locations to travel to and from the boarding schools to which they had been selected.

Freidenfeld (2020: 52) found that 'the best approaches to overcome education barriers in North Malawi tend to be more holistic, combining multiple tactics and recognising the different educational barriers faced by different individuals'. The MMF tries to adopt this kind of holistic approach by combining the payment of school fees and support for necessities with the moral support of the Malawi manager who develops a relationship with each of the MMF girls through termly visits to each school.

Looking forward

Freidenfeld proposed a number of ways in which NGOs like MMF could develop and improve their strategies for supporting girls' in Malawi.

- NGOs could try to ensure that their work has a longer-lasting impact by assisting girls to secure apprenticeships, vocational training and higher education opportunities. For MMF, this would involve building on their successful partnership with the Soko Fund which gives university bursaries to five women who had been funded by MMF at school.
- Although primary school is tuition-free, there are still barriers to both girls' and boys' school attendance, which sits at about 80% (World Bank Data, 2014). Those who drop out of primary education are likely to be the poorest and most marginalised. By extending support to children in primary school, NGOs could assist in further promoting educational equity.
- To go beyond a solely mitigating role, NGOs require to build partnerships with communities as well as schools, working towards breaking down gender inequalities and promoting a more inclusive, empowering approach to girls' education, including that of excluded groups, including children with disabilities.
- Many external NGOs classify their own knowledge as 'expertise' while, often inadvertently, reinforcing paternalism and reproducing colonial hierarchies (Ferguson, 2015). MMF could build on the mentoring and support role embodied in the work of the Malawian

manager to increase liaisons with parents/guardians, so that they too can act as community-based mentors and role models.

- Partnership working would be greatly improved if there were better communication channels between beneficiaries, their parents, MMF, and key partners in Scotland and Malawi. Although MMF has been active in finding effective ways to communicate using smart phones and messaging services, there remain significant problems in the current infrastructure, especially in rural areas where mobile phone signal and internet access are particularly poor (Porter et al., 2012).

Conclusion

This report presents the research of a student, Anna Freidenfeld, on placement with the Mamie Martin Fund in 2020. It summarises Freidenfeld's findings in relation to girls' education in Malawi, the barriers girls face and the actions which can ameliorate their situations. Freidenfeld (2020) presented her analysis of MMF's pupil data in the context of the literature about girls' education, specifically in Malawi.

Both the literature and the data demonstrate the many and complex barriers to education which are experienced by girls in Malawi. Freidenfeld (op.cit.) found that the strategies adopted by MMF to support girls at secondary school addressed many of the challenges faced by girl pupils, challenges that went far beyond the payment of fees. MMF's success in supporting girls at school is evidenced by a much higher retention and completion rate (of secondary school) than the national average. Much remains to be done, of course, and this report includes recommendations for NGOs operating in this area and offers MMF food for thought in considering the way forward. MMF must continue to work in the supportive way it does but should consider how it can improve communication with beneficiaries and their families. Finally, MMF should consider how extending its partnerships might improve access to further education and training for MMF girls after they leave secondary school.

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A report on the quantitative data analysed as part of the Anna's placement is available from <https://mamiemartin.org/our-work/what-we-do/impact>