

Impact of Female Teachers on Learning Outcomes of Girls in Rural Primary Schools in Malawi

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Abstract

This paper reports on the findings of a study that was conducted in four rural education districts in Malawi: namely, Ntchisi, Neno, Machinga and Mzimba, where a certain local Non-Governmental Organization built houses specifically for female teachers so as to ensure availability of female teachers in the rural primary schools. The study therefore intended to assess the impact of the female teachers on retention and performance of girls in the schools and targeted a total of twenty intervention primary schools and six non-intervention primary schools. The study further assessed whether the availability of female teachers in schools helps to reduce cases of violence against girls. The study used a mixed method research design and collected both quantitative and qualitative data that gave useful information about the impact of the female teachers in the schools.

Both the quantitative and qualitative findings of the study affirmed that the availability of female teachers in rural schools helps to improve retention and performance of girls in the schools. The study further revealed that cases of violence against girls are also reduced when female teachers are available at the schools. Indicators of retention such as enrolment, dropout and attendance, all skewed towards the positive side in the intervention schools when compared to non-intervention schools. Similarly, performance of girls was better in intervention schools than non-intervention schools. The study concluded that female teachers make a difference for the girls in rural schools in as far as achievement of learning outcomes is concerned. As such the government and stakeholders in education should ensure availability of female teachers in schools. Initiatives that can help retain the female teachers in the rural schools need to be explored, implemented and supported.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

It is an incontrovertible fact that, “when you educate a girl, you educate a nation”. Research worldwide has elucidated this point and validated claims that educating girls and women is very vital for the economic development of any country in the world. According to Tembon and Fort, Eds (2008), girls’ education is positively correlated with increased economic productivity, more robust labor markets, higher earnings and improved societal health and wellbeing. Schultz (1993) indicates that a year of schooling for girls reduces infant mortality by 5 to 10%; while Summers (1994) points out that children of mothers with five years of primary education are 40% more likely to live beyond age 5. Hence educating women has a greater impact on children’s schooling than educating men; and that there is evidence of more productive farming methods which are

attributed to increased female schooling and a 43% decline in malnutrition (Smith & Haddad 1999). Further, Hill and King (1995) add that the more schooling a girl receives as a child, the fewer number of children she will have later on in life. She is also more likely to get a job and earn a higher wage if she has a basic education.

Despite all these benefits, girls' education in Malawi is facing a myriad of challenges ranging from access and retention to achievement of the girl child. Though Malawi through free primary Education which was introduced in 1994 has made great strides in increasing access of children especially girls to school, these have resulted in minor improvements in completion rates. High dropout rates have resulted in low survival rates. Girls' enrolment declines slowly as they move to upper classes, especially in rural schools such that by the end of the primary cycle in Standard 8, girls constitute only 34 per cent of enrolment in Standard 8 (Malawi Education Sector Implementation plan for 2009 – 2013). International and national achievement project assessments, such as Southern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality - SACMEQ (Milner *et al.*, 2011), and the Primary Achievement School Study (PASS) have revealed gender differences in student achievement where boys consistently outperformed girls significantly in every area assessed.

Owing to the many challenges girls' education is facing in Malawi as well as to the benefits of educating a girl child and also taking into consideration that government cannot manage it alone, ActionAid which is one of the local non-governmental organization (NGO) in Malawi through its education work that focuses on promoting girls' education, implemented an initiative to get female teachers into rural schools to act as role models for girls. ActionAid believed the availability of female teachers in the schools could be a motivation for the girls to be in school.

Research has also established a positive link between availability of female teachers and girl enrolment in schools. For instance, a study by Kirk (2006) in Nepal indicated that mothers feel more comfortable talking about their children with a woman teacher than a male teacher. Kirk (2006) also mentions that the presence of women in schools can impact positively on girls' retention in school and on their achievement. She further argues that in schools where girls are in the minority, the presence of one or more female teachers may also ensure protection for girls from unwanted attention from boys or male teachers, and even from sexual abuse and exploitation. Kent (2013) concurs with Kirk (2006) and adds that female teachers are less likely to perpetuate gender discrimination and harassment thereby creating a safe space for girls to learn.

ActionAid Malawi therefore provided houses for female teachers in the rural schools where there were no female teachers and engaged with the District Education Managers (DEMs) to ensure that female teachers are posted to the rural schools and that they are the ones occupying the houses they built. These female teachers were provided with some training to understand the importance of girls' education and their role in supporting the girls to excel in their education and also to be good role models to the girls.

This study therefore intended to assess the impact of the initiative on girls' participation in school based on the hypothesis that the presence of female teachers in rural schools increases the retention and improves performance of girls.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The general purpose of the study was to assess the impact of female teachers in the schools that have been supported with housing on the retention and performance of girls. The study therefore sought to provide answers to among other issues, the following questions:

- What role do the female teachers play in the school?
- What has been the trend in girls' enrolment for the past five years prior to the study?
- What has been the trend in girls' retention in the past five years?
- What has been the trend in girls' performance in the past five years in National examinations?
- What is the relationship between the female teachers and the girls?
- How do the female teachers collaborate with mother groups to keep the girls in school?
- What challenges do the female teachers face in supporting the girls?
- Do the female teachers understand their role in supporting girls' education?
- What support would the female teachers require to effectively support girls' education?
- Is the provision of the houses to the female teachers adequate to keep them in the rural schools? If not what are the challenges?
- What more needs to be done to keep female teachers in the rural schools?
- Of the houses that were specifically constructed for the female teachers how many were actually occupied by female teachers?
- What are the girls' own perspectives on the role of female teachers in their schools?
- What are the girls' own perspectives on the impact of female teachers in their schools?

2. Methodology

2.1 Study Design

This study employed a mixed method research design to the collection of data that gave useful information about the impact of the female teachers in the schools that have been supported with housing on the retention and performance of girls. A mixed method design uses both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection concurrently in order to best understand the phenomenon of interest (Creswell et.al, 2003 captured in Maree, 2007). Concurrent procedures entail collecting both forms of data at the same time during the study and then integrating the information in the interpretation of the overall results (Creswell, 2003). Hence, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected in this study. The quantitative data were used to triangulate the qualitative data or vice versa hence the data supplemented each other during the data analysis and interpretation process to give a good picture of the impact of the female teachers in the targeted schools.

Quantitative data were collected mainly through a questionnaire in form of a checklist and captured data that examined the gains/impact made by the female teachers on girls' access, retention and achievement in the schools for a successive five-year period and for this study it was from 2009 to 2014. Cases of violence at the schools were also collected quantitatively. Qualitative data were collected through Key Informant Interviews (KII) and Focus Group

Discussions (FGD). The qualitative data mainly focused on the role of the female teachers and the activities they do to ensure enrolment, attendance, retention and achievement of the girls in the schools. Challenges the female teachers face in the schools were also documented as well as the support they require to effectively support girls' education in the rural schools. Ideas on how to keep the female teachers in rural schools were also solicited.

2.2 Sample Design

The following are the components of the sample for the study:

2.2.1 Districts and Schools

The sample of the districts comprised a total of twenty schools from the intervention districts of Ntchisi, Neno, Machinga and Mzimba. These schools were the ones where ActionAid had built houses and that the District Management Office had posted female teachers to occupy those houses. As a matter of comparison, the study also purposively selected a total of 6 schools where there were no any female teachers so as to gain insights of the experiences of the girls in such schools as well as the perceptions of the male staff, parents and School Management Committees and other stakeholders as regards unavailability of female teachers in such schools and the impact it has on girls' education. For the purpose of this study, the term "intervention schools" refers to the schools where Action Aid built the houses for the female teachers while the term "Non-intervention schools" refer to the control schools i.e. schools where there were no any female teachers.

Noteworthy is the fact that in these 20 schools, Action Aid had built a total of 25 houses. However, at the time of the study, 21 of the 25 houses were occupied by female teachers while 2 were occupied by male teachers and the remaining 2 houses were vacant pending posting of a female teachers to the schools.

2.2.2 Sample of Respondents

The sampled respondents for the study were as follows:

National level

Ministry of Education headquarters staff, ActionAid staff and staff from other organizations working on girls' education.

District level

District Education Managers (DEMs); Coordinating Primary Education Advisor (CPEA); and ActionAid staff that were coordinating girls' education at the districts

School level

Primary Education Advisors (PEAs) for the targeted schools; Head teachers (one per school); all female teachers occupying the project houses in the targeted schools; other teachers (3 per school); 3 members of School Management Committees (SMCs); 3 members of Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs); all members of Mother Groups; 10 learners from standard 4 to 8 (two from each class).

Community level

Two Village Chiefs per school; 2 members from Community Based Organizations (CBO) and 6 to 8 Parents.

2.3 Data Collection Methods and Procedures

Data for the assignment were collected using a combination of tools to strengthen the credibility of the data and to collect a variety of information that was responsive to the research questions of the study. Due to the fact that the study used a mixed approach to collect both qualitative and quantitative data, it was felt necessary for the study to use key informant interviews; focus group discussions; and questionnaires (checklist) as ideal data collection methods and tools for the study. Below is a brief description of the research instruments that were used.

2.3.1 Key Informant Interviews

Key informants are key stakeholders that hold essential information concerning the issue at hand. For this assignment, these were at national, district, school and community levels.

At the national level

At the national level the following were interviewed: Director for Basic Education at the Ministry of Education Headquarters; Regional and Thematic Manager for Education and Youth at ActionAid Head office; and the Programmes officer at the Forum for African Women Educationists in Malawi (FAWEMA). The interviews focused mainly on how they support the female teachers; the kind of trainings they provide to the female teachers to ensure girls' education and how frequently; how they monitor the female teachers; success stories and achievements of the female teachers on enrolment, retention and performance of the girl learners in the schools; and the challenges the female teachers face in the schools.

At the district level

At the district level, the key informants were the District Education Manager, Coordinating Primary Education Advisor and the district officials for Action Aid. The questions again focused on how they support the female teachers; the kind of trainings they provide to the female teachers to ensure girls' education and how frequently; how they monitor the female teachers; success stories and achievements of the female teachers on enrolment, retention and performance of the girl learners in the schools; and the challenges the female teachers face in the schools. Their views on how to effectively support the female teachers as well as what to do to keep the female teachers in the rural schools were also implored.

At the school and community levels

At the school level, the key informants were the Primary Education Advisor, the head teachers and the female teachers that have been provided with the housing while at community level, key informants were Village head men of 2 targeted villages

surrounding the sampled schools and at least two CBO members from selected CBOs working with ActionAid on girls' education. The interviews helped to collect information on the impact of the female teachers in the schools, the initiatives they do to keep the girls in school and motivate them, how they relate with mother groups and other actors on girls' education in the schools as well as the girls themselves, the challenges the female teachers face and how they are supported. Ideas on how best to help the female teachers to remain in the rural schools and support the retention and performance of girls were also explored through the interviews.

2.3.2 Focus Group Discussions

Focus group discussions were conducted at both school and community level with other teachers, SMC/ PTAs, Mother Groups, learners and parents separately to engage them in articulating issues and opinions on the activities and impact of the female teachers in the schools. Just like with the interviews, the FGDs sought to explore issues on how the female teachers relate with mother groups and other actors on girls' education in the schools as well as the girls themselves, the challenges the female teachers face and how they are supported. The FGDs also solicited ideas on how best to help the female teachers to remain in the rural schools and support the retention and performance of girls.

2.3.3 School Checklist/Questionnaire

A school checklist was administered to head teachers of the sampled primary schools and collected quantitative data on variables such as learner enrolment, drop out, attendance and performance. It also collected data on number of teachers at the school and their qualifications. Cases of violence were also quantitatively documented through the checklist.

2.3.4 Document Review

A review of critical documents on girl child education and role of female teachers on girls' education in Malawi and elsewhere was conducted in order to identify best practices in girls' enrolment, retention and achievement in school.

2.4 Data Analysis

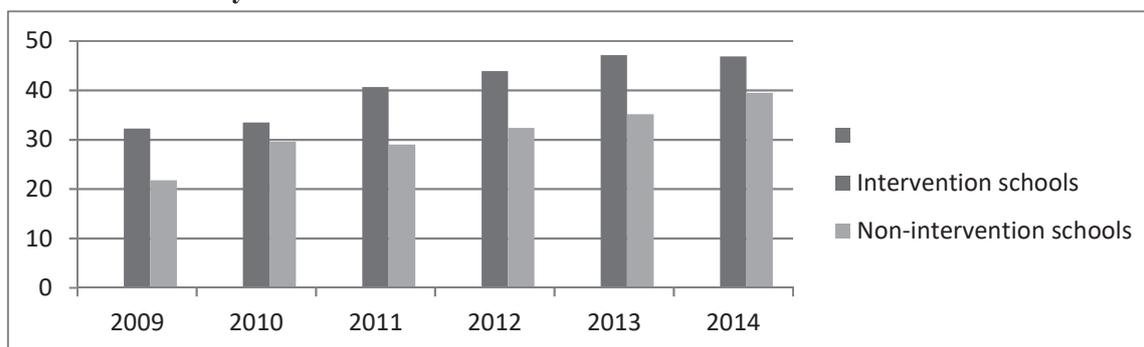
Given that both quantitative and qualitative data were collected in this study, the data collected were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. Quantitative data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS) software in combination with Excel. The analysis basically was in form of descriptive statistics such as frequency counts, percentages, averages and crosstabs where necessary. Qualitative data were analyzed by building a logical chain of evidence. The data were reduced by clustering common themes and then tallying and ranking of the key informant responses and focus group discussions to uncover main issues that were arising. These two sets of analyses were triangulated to enable a more robust assessment of the impact of the female teachers in the schools.

3. Presentation and Discussion of Findings

3.1 Learner Enrolment

One of the objectives of this study was to assess the impact of female teachers on retention of girls in rural schools. One of the determinants of retention is the trend of enrolment of learners over a period of time. Hence for this study, data were collected on enrolment of learners from 2009 to 2014 academic years. Figure 1 displays the mean enrolment of girls from 2009 to 2014 in both intervention and non-intervention schools.

Figure 1: Mean enrolment of girls in intervention and non-intervention schools from 2009 to 2014 academic years



From figure 1, in terms of enrolment, the intervention schools were doing well when compared to schools where there were no female teachers. Generally there has been an upward trend of enrolment in both categories of schools but the mean enrolment per class for the intervention schools was far much greater than that for the non-intervention schools in the consecutive years from 2009 to 2014. All factors being equal, this could be an indication of a positive impact of the availability of female teachers in the schools.

The study learnt that the female teachers put in place measures to encourage girls to enroll and remain in school and regularly attend classes. For instance, they talked to the girl learners on the importance of school; they followed learners to their homes if they were persistently absent; they rescued girls who were forced into early marriages; and other initiatives as highlighted in section 3.7. One of the success stories that was frequently mentioned in all the intervention schools that were visited was that the availability of female teachers had assisted in increasing enrolment of girls in the schools and the quantitative data collected on enrolment, vindicated this assertion. One learner at one of the schools in Neno district commented that:

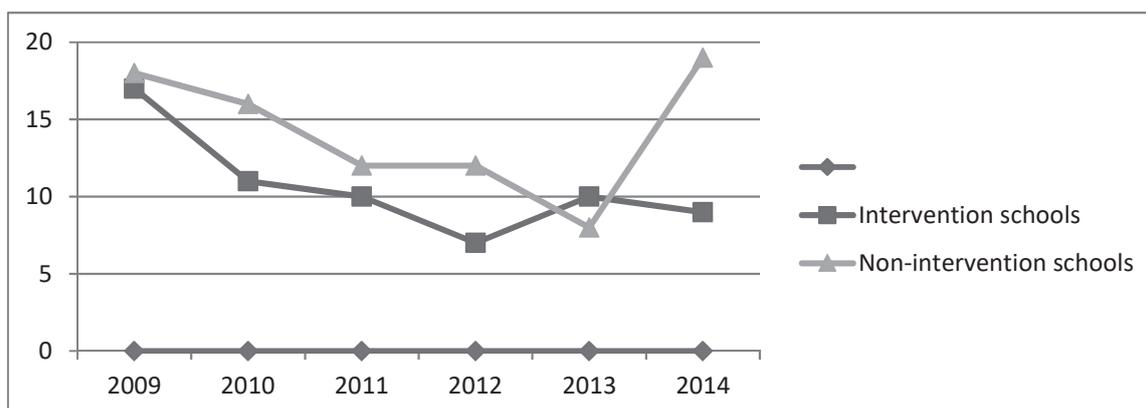
“Female teachers are approachable, when we have issues concerning our sexuality as girls, we report to them and they assist us accordingly. We cannot do that with male teachers. This has led to more girls enrolling and remaining at this school”.

3.2 Learner Dropout

Apart from enrolment, dropout is also another indicator of retention of a school system.

The higher the dropout rate, the lower the retention ability of a school system. This study also assessed the mean dropout rates of girls in both the intervention and non-intervention schools from 2009 to 2014. The findings are presented in figure 2.

Figure 2: Mean percentage dropout rate of girls in intervention and non-intervention schools from 2009 to 2014 academic years



From figure 2, overall, dropout rate of girls is far much higher in non-intervention schools than in the intervention schools although the intervention schools registered a slightly higher dropout rate in 2013 than the non-intervention schools. On average (across the years) the non-intervention schools registered a 14% dropout rate of girls while the intervention schools registered a 10.6% dropout rate. It could be that the initiatives that the female teachers have put in place in the intervention schools are assisting in combating dropout. Respondents to the interviews and focus group discussions concurred that the presence of the female teachers in the schools has assisted in reducing dropout of girls as the teachers act as role models to the girls. One female teacher at one of the visited Primary School in Machinga district narrated how she rescued a girl child from an early marriage:

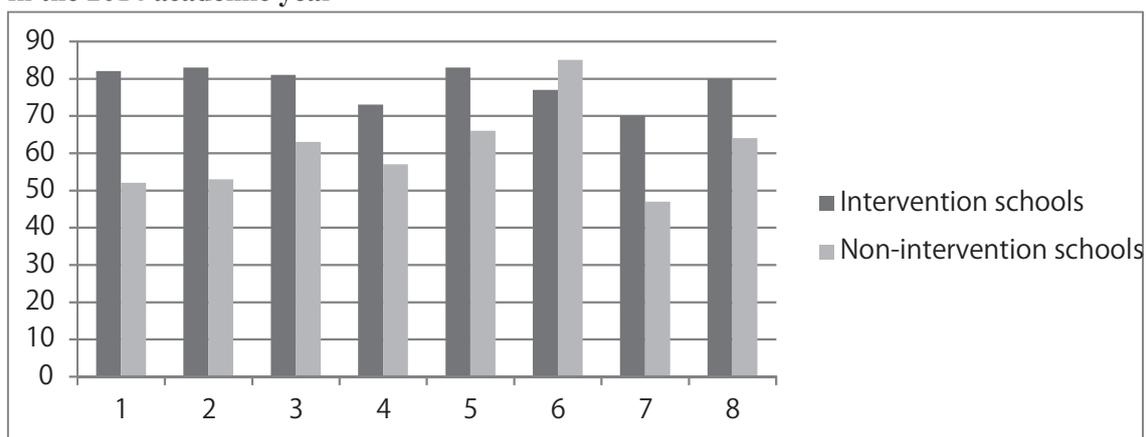
“I talk to the girls at this school on the importance of getting educated and I empower them with skills on how to be self-assertive and ambitious in life. I tell them to be open and I encourage them to report anything that is disturbing their studies. For instance, there was a girl who was being forced by her parents to stop schooling and get married. This girl wrote a letter to me informing me of this issue. I took the issue to the head teacher and we invited the parents for a discussion concerning the education of their child. The issue was resolved and as of now the girl is continuing with her education. She is in standard 7”.

It was further reported by respondents in this study that due to the initiatives that the female teachers and mother groups were carrying out in the schools, more girls who dropped out of school came back to school.

3.3 Learner Attendance

Learner attendance is also positively correlated with retention of learners in a school system. This study collected data on learner attendance in both intervention and non-intervention schools. Figure 3 depicts mean percentage attendance of girls on the day of our visit to the schools from standard 1 to standard 8.

Figure 3: Mean percentage attendance of girls in intervention and non-intervention schools in the 2014 academic year

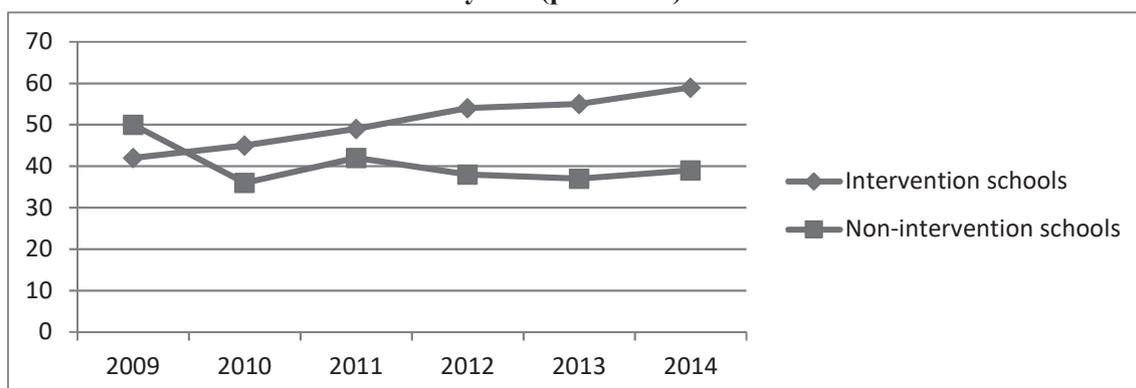


Data in figure 3 give an indication that attendance of girls in intervention schools is much better compared to attendance of girls in non-intervention schools in all the standards except for Standard 6 where the non-intervention schools registered a slightly higher attendance rate than the intervention schools. Overall average percentage attendance for girls in intervention schools was recorded as 79% while that in non-intervention schools was 61%. It could be that initiatives to reduce absenteeism of girls in intervention schools were bringing positive impacts. As earlier stated, the female teachers linked up with mother groups to follow up learners who frequently absented themselves from school.

3.4 Learner Performance

The study also embarked to assess whether availability of female teachers in schools helps to improve performance of girls. Hence data on learner performance during Primary School Leaving Certificate Examinations (PSLCE) were collected in both intervention and non-intervention schools from 2009 to 2014 academic years. Figure 4 illustrates the findings on pass rates during the PSLCE from 2009 to 2014 while appendix 3 highlights detailed information on the pass rates as well as the selection rates of both boys and girls in intervention and non-intervention schools for the same period.

Figure 4: Mean percentage performance of girls in intervention and non-intervention schools from 2009 to 2014 academic years (pass rates)



As illustrated in figure 4, learner performance in intervention schools was much better than learner performance in non-intervention schools. It could be that the initiatives by the female teachers in the intervention schools were implicitly positively impacting on the performance of girls in the schools.

Similar sentiments were echoed by the respondents to this study during the interviews and focus group discussions. They mentioned of better performance of girls as one of the success stories of having female teachers in the schools.

3.5 Incidents of Violence against Girls

The other objective of this study was to find out if the presence of female teachers in schools helps to reduce cases of violence against the girls. The study therefore collected both quantitative and qualitative data on incidents of violence against girls in both intervention and non-intervention schools. Table 2 presents the findings.

Table 2: Incidents of violence against girls in intervention and non-intervention schools

	Percentage occurrence of violence against girls in schools (%)	
	Intervention schools	Non-intervention schools
Physical violence	37%	34%
Sexual abuse	16 %	50%
Harassment	21%	50%
Bullying/teasing	16%	0%
Corporal punishment	0%	17%
Public humiliation	5%	33%

From Table 2, generally cases of violence against girls were reported to be more rampant in non-intervention schools when compared against violence cases in intervention schools. This may affirm the assertion that availability of female teachers in schools somehow helps to reduce

cases of violence against girls. Focus group discussions and interviews with stakeholders yielded similar findings. Nevertheless, it was observed in Table 2 that cases of bullying and teasing the girl child were more in intervention schools than in non-intervention schools, similarly for physical violence. It could be an indication that boys could be disgruntled as most interventions in education are targeting girls. This could be one way of expressing their feelings. Hence the need for proper sensitization of the boys on why most initiatives are targeting the girl child.

3.6 Initiatives by Female Teachers on Girl Child Education

During the focus group discussions as well as interviews with stakeholders, information was solicited on the initiatives that the female teachers were implementing to ensure girl child education in the impact schools. The common initiative mentioned in almost all the schools that were visited was the formation of girls' clubs. It was learnt in this study that the female teachers had instituted girls' clubs in the schools where the girls regularly met with the female teachers and discuss issues pertaining to their education. These clubs, provided fora for the female teachers to interact with the girls, and advised and counseled them on good behavior. They discussed issues and skills on how to avoid early marriages, sexual relationships, unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases among other issues on sexual and reproductive health. Issues to do with good dressing were also discussed during such meetings. The girl learners also took advantage of such meetings to air out their concerns. One girl at one of the schools in Machinga district alluded to this when she reported that:

“We feel free to talk to the female teachers on anything that concerns our life. They are very welcoming and provide us with guidance on how to behave both in school and out of school. We report to them any problems that we feel can disturb us from our education”.

It was also learnt that the availability of the female teachers in the schools inspire the girl learners as the female teachers act as role models to the girls. Once in a while the female teachers provided motivational talks to the girl learners so as to empower them to be self-assertive and aim high in life. In some schools it was learnt that the female teachers linked up with other women who had excelled in school and were doing better economically to address the girls so as to encourage them in their education.

Another notable initiative was that the female teachers collaborated and worked together with other existing structures within the school setting on issues to do with girl child education. One key partner that was frequently mentioned was the mother group. More often female teachers and mother groups planned their activities on girl child education together and discharged them jointly. For instance, it was reported at one primary school by a female teacher that:

“When I notice that a certain girl is repeatedly absent from school, I inform the mother group to follow her up at her home and find out what the problem is and so we address the problem together.”

At another school in Ntchisi, the female teachers' efforts together with the mother group have led to some girls coming back to school after they dropped out of school due to pregnancies. Additionally, in some schools in Machinga, the female teachers have instituted secret boxes where the girls secretly drop in notes detailing any issues of misbehavior by colleagues or teachers especially male teachers. Issues of violence are also reported to the female teachers through the same channel.

This initiative provided the female teachers with information on issues that needed address and follow up. For instance, at one school in Machinga, there was a certain girl who was being pressurized by her parents to get married but then the girl was against it. Due to too much pressure from the parents, the girl dropped in a letter to the female teacher informing her of the issue and pleading with the teacher to intervene on the issue. The female teacher took the issue to the head teacher, who then called for audience with the parents of the girl. The issue was then resolved and the girl continued with her education. At the time of the study, she was in standard 7.

The study also learnt that the female teachers in some schools had gone a step further to organize remedial lessons for the girls after school hours. They had identified a day in a week when the girls came together and did some extra school activities under their supervision. Sometimes mother groups assisted the female teachers on this activity. Action Aid district office provided them with teaching and learning materials such as flip charts, markers, plain papers and other materials.

All in all, it appeared there was some form of effort on the part of the female teachers to go an extra mile to assist the girls to continue with their education. They had put in place a number of initiatives as discussed above to motivate the girl learners and also empower them to become who they want to be in future.

3.7 Support Female Teachers Receive

For the female teachers to play their role effectively in ensuring girls' education, they need support from all stakeholders. Hence this study solicited information on the nature and kind of support the female teachers received as they discharged their duties in the schools. The female teachers first and foremost acknowledged the support they received from Action Aid. They mentioned of trainings provided by Action Aid on guidance and counseling, role modeling, child rights and others as very critical to their role in the schools. Nevertheless, they bemoaned the frequency with which the trainings took place and suggested that they be done on a regular basis so that they are fully empowered with the skills on how to handle and assist the girls better. Support by Action Aid in terms of teaching and learning materials for remedial lessons such as flip charts, markers, plain papers, rulers, pens and other resources was also acknowledged by the female teachers although they indicated that the resources provided were often not adequate.

The female teachers also acknowledged the support they received from mother groups. As already indicated in earlier sections, the female teachers related well with the mother groups and worked together for the same purpose i.e. ensuring girl child education. While the female teachers concentrated on school level initiatives, the mother groups went as far as the community level in

addressing issues hampering girl child education. Similar support was also ascribed to chiefs who the female teachers said, complemented their efforts in girl' child education by putting in place bylaws to ensure that parents send their children including girls to school. The study learnt that in some schools for instance in Neno, chiefs punished those who faltered the bylaws. They even demanded payment of a goat from a guardian whose child was not going to school.

3.8 Challenges Female Teachers Face

The study further explored the challenges that the female teachers face as they discharge their role in ensuring girls education in the schools. Commonly mentioned challenges in almost all the impact schools visited included: inadequate number of female teachers at the schools; Transport problems and poor road networks; lack of social services such as reliable water sources, hospitals and markets; lack of marriage suitors; and hostile communities among other challenges.

3.8.1 Inadequate Number of Female Teachers at the Schools

District and school level respondents in this study alluded to shortage of female teachers in the schools as limiting the efforts of the few available teachers in ensuring girl child education. Looking at the statistics of teachers in this study, it was noted that in total, the 20 impact schools in the four districts had only 75 female teachers against an enrolment of 6893 girls. This means one female teacher was responsible for about 92 girls. Some schools in the target districts had just one female teacher against the whole girl enrolment at the school at the time of conducting this study. Such a teacher definitely would be overwhelmed with the work. Socially the female teacher is also affected as she has no female friend to turn to and relate to at the school. As such she suffers from loneliness and boredom. Consequently, the teacher may request for a transfer to another school where she will get company. One DEM alluded to this challenge and advocated for more female teachers in the schools when she said that:

“It is difficult for a female teacher to interact freely with a male teacher. It is necessary that there should be 2 or more female teachers at a school so that they give each other company and support”.

Unfortunately, female teachers do not want to be posted to the rural schools. It was noted in this study where some of the houses built by Action Aid were not occupied, or it took too long for the house to be occupied simply because the female teachers refused to be posted to such schools or because the female teacher left the school for one reason or the other.

3.8.2 Transport Problems

Action Aid was doing a wonderful job in reaching out to the very rural and remote schools by building the houses for the female teachers to occupy so that they act as role models to the girl learners in such schools. However, the state of being very rural and remote brings in another problem in terms of mobility of the teachers when they want to access basic necessities for their wellbeing. This is complemented by poor road networks for example in Neno the terrain is very

bad, hilly and slippery at the same time. It is the same in Ntchisi and other districts. When asked how to deal with this problem, the female teachers and other stakeholders suggested that one ideal solution to the problem was to engage organizations or the government give them loans for motorcycles and that the loans should be payable in monthly installments.

This would assist to ease their mobility problems when they want to access basic social services which are always distant in rural areas.

3.8.3 Lack of Social Services

The female teachers also lamented lack of basic social services such as reliable water sources, hospitals and markets around their schools. Trekking long distances and in some cases as is the case in Neno, uphill, to draw water from community wells drains their energy and reduces their morale to remain in the rural schools. Similarly, accessibility to hospitals and markets for basic necessities is also a problem. Stakeholder efforts in making the environment conducive to their stay, is needed so as to keep the female teachers in rural schools and help in girl child education.

3.8.4 Lack of Marriage Suitors

The female teachers have also their standards in terms of men they want to get married to. When a young vibrant female teacher is posted to the rural school, she faces the challenge of not finding suitable men for marriage and this leads to her instability. Consequently, this young teacher requests for a transfer to another school where she can easily find suitable men for marriage. PEAs and DEMs as well as Head teachers alluded to this challenge that the young female teachers face when they are posted to the rural schools. For stability purposes, suggestions from stakeholders were that the DEM's office should post stable married female teachers to occupy the houses. Female teachers married to teachers should have an added advantage.

3.8.5 Hostile Communities

The study further learnt that one of the problems being experienced by some of the female teachers in the schools as they ensure girls' education is the hostility of the people around the schools. Special mention was made of some parents who do not want to send their girl children to school. Such people see the female teachers as threats in the communities and so resist the efforts of the teachers to reach out to their girls. At one of the primary schools in Machinga, a female teacher reported that:

“I sometimes face resistance from parents when I go to rescue girls who are forced into marriages by their parents. They insult me claiming I am not the mother to their children and so I should stop interfering in their family matters. When the resistance is too much, I report to Action Aid. Nevertheless, we have rescued about 5 girls this academic year alone who were forced into early marriages”

This could be an indication that there is a need to strengthen links between the female

teachers and the other community structures such as chiefs, mother groups and PTAs and also sensitizing parents on the importance of educating the girl child.

3.9 How to keep female teachers in rural schools

Keeping female teachers in rural schools is one of the major challenges that the education system is facing in Malawi. The director for basic education alluded to the same when he said:

“Most requests of transfers that my office receives are from female teachers in rural schools because the rural setting is not ideal for female habitation. Most young female teachers request for transfers because they cannot find capable men within the local setting to marry them”.

Female teachers do not find the rural settings ideal for their stay. From the data gathered in this study, it is obvious that just building houses for female teachers to occupy in the rural schools, is not enough to keep the female teachers at the rural schools. A lot needs to be done. The female teachers as well as other respondents in this study suggested the following complementary things:

- The issue on the mobility problem featured highly on what to be done to keep female teachers in rural schools. Concerns were mainly on how to access social services which are usually distant from their schools. Ways and means on how to alleviate this problem need to be explored if the female teachers are to remain in the rural schools. Some of the teachers themselves suggested loans or donations on motorcycles. Some DEMs and PEAs had similar suggestions.
- Posting of additional female teachers to the rural schools so that there is not just one female teacher at a school. Two or more female teachers at a school could reduce the workload in ensuring girl child education. The female teachers as well could provide company to each other and so reduce loneliness and boredom. However, this calls for construction of additional houses for female teachers in the identified schools. The director for basic education alluded to the same and pleaded for more teacher houses in rural schools for more female teachers to occupy.
- The houses for teachers in the rural schools need to be electrified. Since these houses are built in very remote settings where more often there is no electricity, the teachers suggested that solar panels be installed so that the teachers can feel more comfortable to stay in the rural setting. One female teacher complained that:

“Before I came here, I was living in a house that had electricity and so I bought several electronic gadgets that I was using for my comfortable living. Now I am here, staying in a house that has no electricity as such I have just piled my electronic equipment at the corner. This pains me a lot! Had it not been for my husband who happens to be a teacher as well at this school, I would have requested for a transfer to a better school.”

- Government should be posting married female teachers to occupy the houses where possible. Head teachers in the visited schools lamented that unmarried female teachers are often not stable. One head teacher in Ntchisi district remarked that:

Once unmarried female teachers do not find marriage suitors in the villages, they always want to be transferred. If government sends us a female teacher who is married to a teacher to occupy the houses built by Action Aid, it will be like killing two birds with one stone. The school would benefit more.

- In-service training of the female teachers posted to the rural schools under the Action Aid initiative was also among the highly ranked requirements of the female teachers. The study noted that some of the teachers were just posted to the schools without any orientation on how they will ensure girls' education in those schools. Such teachers might not make much impact because they are not very much aware of what is expected of them. Hence initial orientation and regular trainings of the female teachers posted to the rural schools is a must if they are to perform their role effectively.
- The environments in which the female teachers discharge their duties need to be conducive and attractive if the female teachers are to remain in the rural schools. The study noted that basic school infrastructure in the intervention schools was not adequate. For instance, classroom to learner ratio was 1:82; only 1 out of the 20 schools had electricity; only 2 schools had libraries; 12 had staffrooms; and 2 schools had no any source of reliable water on school premises. Such environments offer little to attract the female teachers to remain in the rural schools.

4. Conclusion

This study assessed the impact of female teachers on retention and performance of girls in schools where Action Aid built houses specifically for female teachers. It embarked also to assess whether the availability of female teachers in schools helps to reduce cases of violence against girls. The study was based on the hypothesis that the presence of female teachers in rural schools increases the retention and improves performance of girls. Both the quantitative and qualitative findings of the study, confirm the hypothesis. Almost all the variables that determine retention and performance of girls that were assessed in this study gave positive results.

Enrolment was found to be high in intervention schools compared to non-intervention schools; dropout rate was lower in intervention schools than in non-intervention schools; attendance was greater in intervention schools than in non-intervention schools; and performance in terms of pass rates was better in intervention schools than in non-intervention schools. Similarly, cases of violence, on average, were lower in intervention schools than in non-intervention schools. Although increases in some variables, across the years, were recorded in both intervention and non-intervention schools, the percentage increase in intervention schools very much surpassed the increases noted in non-intervention schools.

From the findings of this study, it can be concluded that availability of female teachers in

schools helps to improve retention and performance of girls. It also reduces cases of violence against girls. However, for more and much better results, a lot needs to be done in terms of support rendered to the female teachers as well as considerations on factors that would motivate them to remain in the rural settings. The environment in which the teachers operate needs to be conducive as well to their stay. A holistic approach to school improvement in terms of infrastructure provisioning is needed to ensure conducive working environments for the teachers. A good teaching and learning environment attract both teachers and learners. Stakeholder efforts in providing basic infrastructure, social services as well a teaching and learning resources in rural schools is needed if teachers are to remain in rural schools.

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