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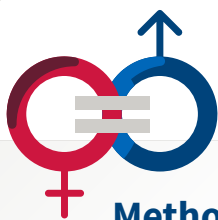


# Barriers to GIRLS' Education in rural Malawi. Evidence from Machinga and Balaka districts

by NORC at the University of Chicago

## Background

The Apatseni Mwayi Atsikana Aphunzire (AMAA) project - funded by USAID's Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Hub and implemented by Save the Children (SC) - constructed 11 Community Day Secondary Schools (CDSS) in Malawi's Machinga District and Balaka District and awarded scholarships to vulnerable boys and girls. As a corollary to an impact evaluation of this project (described in a separate brief), NORC at the University of Chicago, conducted a study to identify determinants of dropping out from school among boys and girls.



## Methodology

NORC gathered quantitative and qualitative data from learners, parents, secondary teachers, and leaders in the 11 treatment communities where secondary schools are being built and in 12 comparison communities without secondary schools but are similar otherwise. NORC created a sample of students attending standards 5, 6, 7, and 8 in the public primary school in each community. The sample comprised 20 students per standard per school who were interviewed in 2018 at baseline and in 2021 at endline. We also tracked these same students every year, updating their enrollment status and interviewing those who had dropped out of school or started secondary school. We also conducted focus group discussions (FGDs) with girls, parents, and secondary school teachers, and key informant interviews (KIIs) with community leaders to gather information about challenges that affect school enrollment, particularly among girls.

## Findings



**Poverty.** Poverty is the main barrier to staying in school in rural areas of the Machinga and Balaka districts. Lack of financial resources to cover direct education costs (e.g., fees, uniforms, materials, etc.) and opportunity costs affects both girls and boys, but this was mentioned more frequently by boys. More boys indicated they left school because they need to work than girls (4.4 percent vs 0.9 percent). **However, girls are significantly more likely to dropout from school than boys.**

**Dropouts between 2018 and 2021**

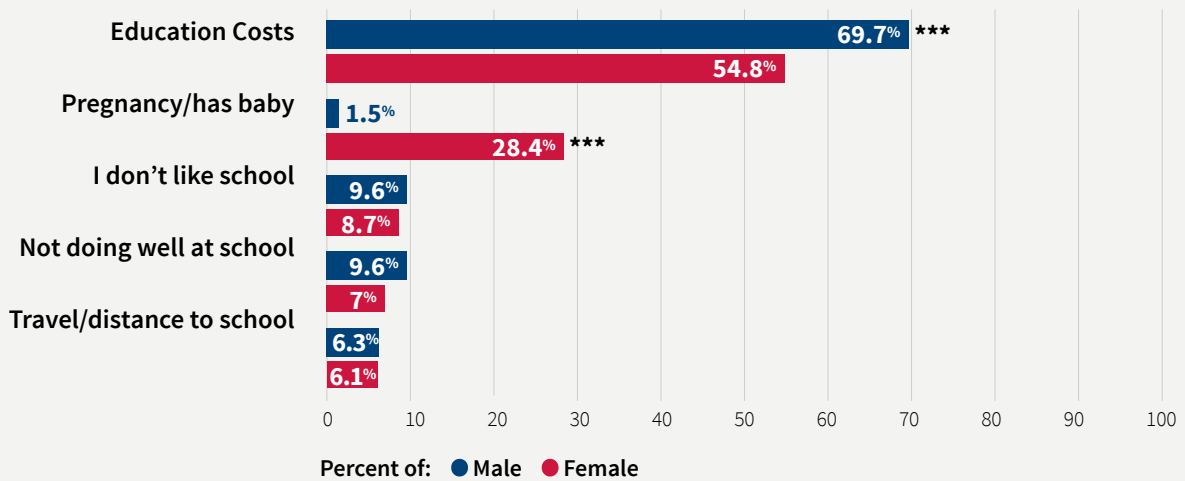
**42.3%**



**34.9%**



**Chart 1: Main reasons for dropping out of school**

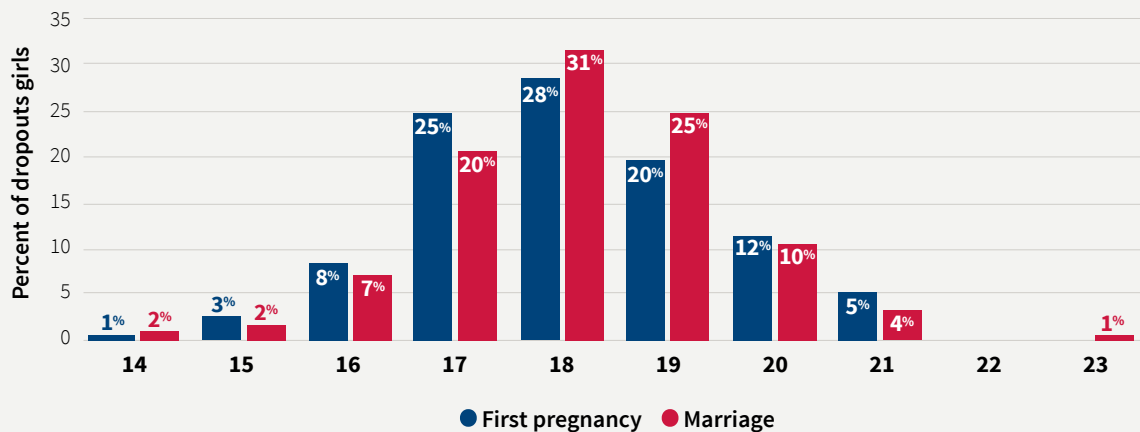


Note: multiple response question, counts for individual items may not add up to the total number of respondents. \*\*\* p < 0.01, \*\* p < 0.05, difference between male and female. Table includes students who ever dropped out between 2018-2021 and responded to the survey question (n=616).



**Pregnancy.** Girls may face the additional challenge of continuing school after getting pregnant or married. A third of the girls who dropped out of school did so because of pregnancy, having a child, or getting married. **Among all girl dropouts in our sample, more than half became pregnant before leaving school, indicating that, for most, there is a clear trajectory of getting pregnant, dropping out of school, and getting married.** Girls who drop out of school because of pregnancy are older but do not stand out in terms of other background characteristics, aspirations, or experiences such as abuse.

**Chart 2: Age of first pregnancy and age of marriage among dropout girls\***



**Overage.** Being overage for their grade level is very common among students in the study area. **Many students are three or more years older than expected for their grade level.** In any given standard, older children are more likely to abandon school.

## Overage students

Competing interests and opportunity costs of attending school become more important as students age. Older students are more likely to find paid jobs or be more productive in the family farm or business. They also are more likely to start behaving as adults, even if they are still in primary school or the early years of secondary school. They are more likely to be sexually active and have romantic relations.

**Although some girls get pregnant as young as 14, in our sample, around 65 percent of the girls that got pregnant had their first pregnancy at age 18 or later. Similarly, most married girls in our sample married when they were 18 or older (70.2 percent).** Starting school on time reduces the risk of dropping out by aligning the student age during the years spent at school with the interests, behaviors and opportunities that encourage school completion.

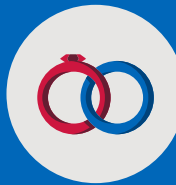
Among the girls that got pregnant

**65%**  
were 18 or older



Among the girls that got married

**70.2%**  
married when they were 18 or older



**Distance to school.** Shorter distance to the school is associated with lower risk of dropping out. Communities where new secondary schools were built show a reduction in the percentage of students that left school because of distance.



**Absenteeism.** Regular school attendance is important to reduce the risk of dropping out. Missing classes impacts girls' and boys' school performance which in turn affects the risk of abandoning school.



**Gender attitudes.** More progressive gender attitudes are significantly higher among caregivers with children still in school than with dropouts. However, this does not necessarily imply causality. Less than one percent of girls mentioned parents' objections as a reason for dropping out.

Dropping out is not related to girls' viewing education as unnecessary nor undesirable for them because they are girls. There are no differences in gender attitudes between the girls that stay in school and the girls that dropped out. Rather, not liking school and poor school performance are more commonly cited reasons for dropping out.



**School climate.** A positive climate in the school is important to encourage students to attend and stay enrolled. However, despite prolonged discussions about harassment in school during focus groups with parents, only 2.6 percent of girls mentioned harassment as a reason for dropping out of school, as opposed to 6.2 percent of the boys.

**Students that mentioned school harassment as a reason for dropping out**

**2.6%**



**6.2%**





**Housework.** Very few girls (0.6 percent) mentioned household chores as a reason for dropping out.



**School facilities.** Creating a supportive context for menstruating young women is important as well. The new AMAA secondary schools are a first step in the correct direction, providing separate toilets for girls and boys with working doors, access to water and disposal baskets.

## Recommendations



**Prioritize policies to provide sexual and reproductive health information and access** to family planning to young women, thereby addressing the issue of pregnancy head-on.



**School construction efforts should be continued in other areas.** Having enough schools close to the rural population increases access to secondary education and helps reducing inequalities.



**Encourage families to enroll children in school at the expected age,** support them in avoiding gaps in children's school enrollment and assist children to prevent grade repetition, thereby reducing the number of overage children in schools. Efforts should be made to ensure students finish secondary school around 18 years of age.



**Act rapidly when a student misses several days of classes** and a develop a protocol to bring the student up to speed to reduce grade repetition and risk of dropping out.

**For more information about the impact evaluation, contact:**

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Full report: **Barriers to Girls' Education in Rural Malawi, Evidence from Machinga and Balaka Districts**