

## Households Characteristics that Determine Perceptions on Girl Education in Malawi

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**Abstract:** The link between illiteracy and poverty and its counterpart link between education and earnings has well-established foundations in both theories of human capital and poverty. There is also a consensus in terms of the disparity in educational achievement that exists between males and females, emanating from education biases between boys and girls. Boys are considered to be more important in many sections of societies in Africa. In order to deal with the unequal distribution in incomes between males and females, females have to be on a par with males in terms of the prerequisite requirements of the consequential occupations that are linked with education levels. Equality can therefore only be achieved if the derived demand of education is not skewed towards boys but remains equally available to both sexes. The fact that the preferences between boys and girls exist calls for an investigation into why anyone, especially a parent of a girl and a boy, would ever prefer one child over another based on their gender. There are a number of reasons that may influence the perception of a parent or a head of household to be biased toward a particular gender. The study uses data collected from the South Eastern Region of Malawi, among rural and urban heads of households on the determinants of the perception of girl education. A number of questions were asked regarding the head of household's perceptions toward girls' education. Cross-tabulations were conducted with chi-square tests on the household characteristics in order to ascertain the characteristics that are associated with people's perception of girl education. The results indicated a difference between male and female-headed households and between rural and urban areas, with the urban households showing no preference between a boy child and a girl child. Male, rural heads of households were found to be against girl education.

**Keywords:** Perceptions; girl education; determinants; head of household; Likert scale

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### 1. Introduction

The fight against poverty needs to take recognition of the complications associated with poverty itself. Poverty can only be dealt with if some of the biases and injustices that have existed in many societies are dealt with. The chauvinistic tendencies in

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most societies are rooted in cultures across the globe and tend to have regressive policies or practices that perpetuate poverty among the suppressed groups in the society. It is an accepted fact that some sections of society and categories of people are more exposed to the risks of poverty than others. This exposure is a result of disparities in access to productive means in society. Unequal access to education, land, exposure, amongst other avenues, tend to limit the ability of those rejected to rescue themselves from the fangs of poverty. The fact that women and children are more vulnerable to poverty cannot be disputed. The most recent statistics of global poverty by the World Bank (2016) indicate that of the 767 million who are still living in poverty, based on the \$1.90 per day measure, more than half are 14 years and younger (World Bank, 2016). The incidences of poverty, especially for women and girls, need a concerted effort with all partners to acknowledge that an equal focus will uplift all categories and sections of society by the same margin, thereby taking with them age-old disparities. One way of making sure that these different sections of society are on a par before the final goal of no poverty is achieved is by dealing with the sources of the inequality and the roots that propagate the existence of such differences in the first place.

In developing countries, especially rural areas of sub-Saharan Africa, a male child has a better advantage and is preferred to a female child. Hence, boys are given a priority in education and any aspect that assists in the development of skills for a better life in the future. Studies in Malawi on education, especially for the lower grades, have shown that there are also school and social obstacles for girls (Bisika, Ntata, & Konyani, 2009; Chimombo, 2009). The idea that girls are disadvantaged may seem absurd to a person sitting in a developed society where such prejudices are non-existent or are, at least, not common. However, the fact that the culture exists cannot be overemphasised and the evidence in the literature is ubiquitous (Chimombo et al., 2000; Davison & Kanyuka, 1990; Smits & Hoşgör, 2006). The aim of this paper is, therefore, to investigate and understand, from the head of household's point of view, the perceptions of educating a girl child, whether or not they perceive a girl child's education as of equal importance as that of boys. If they do not feel there is a difference, then what determines those perceptions? Equally, the study investigated the determinants of the perceptions of those that hold the view that girl education is not important and, hence, treat the education of a girl child as less important. The remainder of the paper is organised as follows: section two presents the literature review, section three is the methodology and the data collection, with the results and discussion presented in section four, the conclusion in section five.

## **2. Literature Review on the Perceptions of Girl Education**

The link between illiteracy and poverty and its counterpart link of education and earnings has well-established foundations in both theories of human capital and those of poverty (Blaug, 1976; Butcher & Anne, 1994; World Bank, 2016). There is also a consensus in terms of the disparity in educational achievement that exists between males and females especially in developing countries, emanating from education biases between boys and girls (Tsui, 2016; Smits & Hoşgör, 2006; Chimombo et al. 2000). Boys are considered to be more important in many sections of societies in Africa. In order to deal with the unequal distribution in incomes between males and females, females have to be on a par with males in terms of the prerequisite skills and requirements of the consequential occupations that are consummate with the respective education levels. The equality can therefore only be achieved if the derived demand of education is not skewed towards boys but remains equally available to both sexes. The fact that the preferences between boys and girls exist calls for an investigation into why anyone, especially a parent of a girl and a boy, would ever prefer one child over another based on their gender. There are a number of reasons that may influence the perception of a parent or a head of household to have a bias between boys and girls. Most of the biases are rooted in cultural practices that have always considered the girl child as secondary to the boy child (Arnold & Huo, 2017). Studies that also show inconclusive results showing girls being preferred to boys also exist in the literature (Andersson, Hank, & Vikat, 2006; Hank, 2007; Fuse, 2010). The focus of this paper, however, does not have preference in general of a boy or a girl, but towards who should get educated and hence receive the support first in cases of inadequate resources. It is common in the rural areas of Malawi that households give the boy child preference in terms of educational support (Bisika et al., 2009).

### **2.1. Parental Perceptions Towards Girls' Education**

Parental attitude and perception towards girl education have been seen to be another factor limiting girl education. Chimombo et al. (2000:16) argue that the responsibility of sending children to school lies in the hands of the parents. Some may argue that such a mandate is surely the responsibility of the government, but the government can only work up to a certain level (for example, the government can build schools and make education affordable). The onus then rests on parents as to whether they send their children to school or not. When it comes to gender and education, matters of who is best to acquire the highest level of education is also the responsibility of the parents. Therefore, the perceptions of the parents on education influences the extent to which the parent will get involved, especially for the girl child (Raina, 2012). These perceptions also appear in children as they observe their parents' behaviour. This is observed even in developed countries (Miller & Budd, 1999).

There are many things that influence the perception of girls' education. Among the main ones are cultural practices and the religion of the parents. Sometimes it's the extent of poverty which requires that children be involved in providing for the household, and girls fall victim to such cases. Jain (2008:17) points out that women have for centuries been considered as mothers and wives and not necessarily breadwinners and, hence, girls need not concentrate much in education as that has little to do with their motherly expectations. These perceptions have been changing over time, although they still persist in some societies, especially in the developing world. These biases have also been reported in the education system where female students are either given lower treatment or face disapproval (Lovell, 1988; Raina, 2012). In other cases, the education of the child has depended on the education of the parents. The perception that the education of the child is not important would usually be associated with uneducated mothers and fathers (Chimombo, 2009:19). That is the reason why, in areas where levels of illiteracy are high, there is a high chance of girl dropouts; and the way to improve the situation, Chimombo (2009) argues, is not by building more schools, but by changing these perceptions.

MANA (2015:1), in their report on Malawi, reported that girls were still dropping out of school even in areas where they have bursary projects, and where they have projects of providing food and clothing to the girl child. It was also reported that, even in these areas, the main problem was the perception of parents towards girl education. It was indicated that parents in these areas still felt that girl education was not important. Some parents were even sending their girls for initiations other than going to school.

### **3. Research Methodology and Data Collection**

The paper used primary data that were collected in a survey conducted in 2016 amongst households in Malawi. In total, a sample of 327 households was involved in the data collection. A random sampling technique was used to identify the households and only the head of household or their spouse were involved in the survey upon securing their consent. A number of statements were used in collecting the perceptions of the head of the household regarding girl education. It was important to establish the reasons why some parents considered girl education of less importance and knowing that would go a long way in changing people's behaviour and practices.

The questionnaire included statements to which the head of household was supposed to agree or disagree on a five-point Likert scale. The scale was as follows: strongly disagree as 1, disagree as 2, neither agree nor disagree as 3, agree as 4 and strongly agree as 5. The statements used were the following:

**Table 1. Questions Used in the Calculation of the Scale**

Question	Statement
1	Would you say that girl education is important?
2	If you had a boy and girl would you prefer the boy getting a better education than the girl?
3	Would you accept your daughter to drop out of school to get married?
4	If your daughter told you she wants to drop out of school to get a job would you allow her?
5	If your daughter fell pregnant would you chase her out to get married to the person who got her pregnant?
6	Do you desire that your daughter attains the highest education?
7	Would you say girls are getting married at a young age in your area?
8	Would you say that girl's education is equally important as boy's education?
9	If a man with a lot of money asked to marry your 15-year-old girl would you allow him?

The heads of households were given these statements to see if they agree or disagree. Further, cross tabulation with a chi-Square test was conducted to assess who among the heads of households agrees with the statements that undermine girl education, thus, considering gender, and also comparing between rural and urban heads of households. The paper also employs correlations and a regression analysis using the Girl Education Perception Index (GEPI), which was calculated based on the statements used in the perceptions.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

The analysis of the paper, although not sophisticated, deals with a very crucial issue in gender dynamics, especially among the low-income households which need understanding before delving deep into what are the intrinsic causes of such perceptions. The results first present the demographics of the sample in terms of gender, marital status, and employment status of the head of households involved in the survey. From Table 2 it is clear that the majority of the heads of household were males, and they were mostly head of the households with a spouse. The male respondents represented 77% of the sample and only 23% as a female-headed household. This is not an indication of fewer women but as a result of the fact that the survey was for the head of households, and in married households, and the husband is taken as the head of household. Table 2 also shows that 76% of the respondents were married, hence a large number of male respondents.

**Table 2. Demographics of the Sample**

<b>Gender</b>	Males	77%
	Female	23%
<b>Marital status</b>	Married	76%
	Single	24%
<b>Employment Status</b>	Employed	34%
	Informal activity	58%
	Unemployed	8%
<b>Location</b>	Rural	64%
	Urban	36%

Table 2 also shows the distribution of employment status, with 58% of the respondents in informal activities and 8% unemployed. With such levels of unemployment and informal activity, the poverty levels would likely be higher.

Table 3 presents the statements which the respondents were supposed to agree or disagree on the questions related to their perceptions towards girl education. The responses have been summarised into two categories, those that agreed or strongly agreed have all been combined into agreeing, and those that disagreed or strongly disagreed have been combined into disagreeing.

**Table 3. Statements of Perceptions About Girl Education**

Statement	Agree	Disagree
1) Would you say that girl education is important?	80.5%	19.5%
2) If you had a boy and girl would you prefer the boy getting better education than the girl?	22.4%	77.6%
3) Would you accept your daughter to drop out of school to get married?	22.6%	77.4%
4) If your daughter told you she wants to drop out of school to get a job would you allow her?	19.8%	80.2%
5) If your daughter fell pregnant would you chase her out to get married to the person who got her pregnant?	23%	77%
6) Do you desire that your daughter attains the highest education?	79.2%	20.8%
7) Would you say girls are getting married at a young age in your area?	45.3%	54.7%
8) Would you say that girls' education is equally important as boys' education?	66.4%	33.6%
9) If a man with a lot of money asked to marry your 15- year old girl would you allow him?	28.1%	71.9%

The results in Table 3 show that the majority of the respondents, up to 70% on average, responded in an expected way, like disagreeing with misogynistic statements and agreeing with reasonable statements. However, there is up to 30% on average that are of the view that a girl's education is not as important as that of a boy child. For example, statement 8 that asks if they consider girl education as equally important as boy education, 33.6% of the respondents, responded in the negative. Although the majority responded in the affirmative, 33.6% is such a large number of head of household to consider girl education as not important. These are the people then that accepted that they can let their 15-year-old girl get married to a rich man or can accept their daughter to drop out of school to get married. Table 4 presents the response to statement 1, which asks about the perception of the importance of education. It is analysed by location.

**Table 4. The Importance of Girl Education by Location**

	<b>Rural</b>	<b>Urban</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>% within rural</b>	<b>% within urban</b>	<b>%Total</b>
strongly agree	70	88	158	33.50%	74.60%	48.30%
Agree	49	30	79	23.40%	25.40%	24.20%
neither agree nor disagree	11	0	11	5.30%	0%	3.40%
Disagree	65	0	65	31.10%	0%	19.90%
strongly disagree	14	0	14	6.70%	0%	4.30%
Total	209	118	327	100.00%	100	100.00%

The statement of the importance of girl education analysed by location shows a worrying picture of the perception of the rural people. The results in Table 4 shows that all those in Table 3 that indicated that girl education is not important were actually from the rural areas. Approximately 74% of the total population within the urban strongly agreed with the notion of girl education against only 34% of the population within the rural areas. None from the urban areas disagreed with the notion, but 31% from the rural disagreed and some 6.70% actually strongly disagreed with the fact that girl education is important. We can conclude that not all parents from the rural areas consider girl education as important, hence why most girls from rural areas either repeat classes or even drop out of school. The other reason could probably be because of a lack of parental support.

Table 5 presents the statement of whether the parent would allow their daughter to drop out of school to get a job. The majority of the households disagreed with that idea. There was a small percentage of parents, mostly from the rural areas, that agreed with the statement that they would allow their daughter to drop out of school in order for her to get a job.

**Table 5. If Your Daughter Told You She Wants to Drop out of School to get a Job Would You Allow Her**

	Rural	Urban	Total	% within rural	% within urban	% total
Strongly agree	8	1	9	3.80%	0.8%	2.80%
Agree	33	5	38	15.80%	4.2%	11.60%
Neither agree nor disagree	3	0	3	1.40%	0%	0.90%
Disagree	73	57	131	34.90%	49.20%	40.10%
Strongly disagree	92	54	146	44.00%	45.80%	44.60%
Total	209	118	327	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

The people from the rural areas who say girl education is not as important as boy education can further be analysed by gender. Table 6 present a cross-tabulation of the statement by gender. The numbers in Table 6, although small, show that there are more males that disagree with the importance of girl education. It is therefore clear that females realise the importance of girl education. The males that feel girl education is not important are those that still have traditional thinking that girls are not at the same level as males. The chi-square test, however, shows that there is no significant difference between males and females overall.

**Table 6. Cross Tabulation with Gender**

		Would you say that girl education is important					Total
		Strongly agree	agree	neither agree nor disagree	disagree	strongly disagree	
Male	Count	144	57	8	29	13	251
	% within Gender HH	57.4%	22.7%	3.2%	11.6%	5.2%	100.0%
	Within response	78.3%	72.2%	72.7%	74.4%	92.9%	76.8%
	% of Total	44.0%	17.4%	2.4%	8.9%	4.0%	76.8%
Female	Count	40	22	3	10	1	76
	% within Gender HH	52.6%	28.9%	3.9%	13.2%	1.3%	100.0%
	Within response	21.7%	27.8%	27.3%	25.6%	7.1%	23.2%
	% of Total	12.2%	6.7%	0.9%	3.1%	0.3%	23.2%
	Count	184	79	11	39	14	327
	% within Gender HH	56.3%	24.2%	3.4%	11.9%	4.3%	100.0%
	Within response	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
	% of Total	56.3%	24.2%	3.4%	11.9%	4.3%	100.0%

The Chi Square test has a p-Value of 0.488

The results from all the questions have a similar result of a few groups of people who feel girl education is not as important and these are mostly male heads of household in the rural areas.



To further narrow down the characteristics of the parents that indicated girl education to be of less importance than that of boys, an index on the girl education perceptions, the Girl Education Perceptions Index (GEPI) was calculated. Based on the nine statements, the responses were 1 for strongly disagree and 6 for strongly agree, hence the higher the score, the more likely the head was to agree that girl education is not important; and the lower the score, the more likely the perception on supporting girl education. Results in Table 7 present the descriptive statistics of the GEPI.

**Table 7. Descriptive Statistics of GEPI**

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Girl education perception index (GEPI)	327	14.00	39.00	28.6024	3.47485

*Source: Calculations from the Survey Data*

Since the lowest score per question is 1 and a maximum score per question is 5, and there are 9 questions, the minimum score expected would be 9 and the maximum score would be 45. The descriptive statistics in Table 7 show that the minimum was 14 and the maximum was 39. The standard deviation of 3.47 also indicates that there was some variation in the responses across the head of households.

Using this GEPI, further analysis was done to assess the income level of those that thought girl education was not as important as boy education. Using the household total income and the GEPI, a bivariate correlation was conducted and the results reported in Table 8.

**Table 8. Correlations of Total Income and GEPI**

		Total income	Girl education perception index (GEPI)
Total income	Pearson Correlation	1	-.189**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.001
	N	326	326
Girl education perception index (GEPI)	Pearson Correlation	-.189**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	
	N	326	327

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The results in Table 8 show that there is a negative correlation between total household income and the GEPI. The correlation is significant at 1% significance level with a p-value of 0.001. Since the higher the score on the GEPI indicates agreeing with the statements that consider girl education as less important, the negative correlation implies that people with higher income hold the opposing view. However, people with lower income are the ones that are likely to consider girl education as less important and hence have their daughters drop out to get married.

Thus, one can conclude that these perceptions are a poverty issue and a cultural issue. A similar correlation was also done on the GEPI and years of schooling of the head of household. The results in Table 9 also confirm the same result.

**Table 9. Correlation Between Education and GEPI**

		Girl education perception index (GEPI)	Years of schooling of head of household
Girl education perception index	Pearson Correlation	1	-.121*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.028
	N	327	327
Years of schooling of head of household	Pearson Correlation	-.121*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.028	
	N	327	327
Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)			

The negative correlation coefficient, which is significant at 5% level of significance, implies that the educated head of household perceives girl education to be important, whilst those with lower levels of education perceive girl education of less importance.

Finally, to clearly show the relationship of these household characteristics of the heads of household in relation to the GEPI, an ordinary least squares regression was estimated with GEPI as a dependent variable and household total income, gender of head of household, age and education level as independent variables. The results of the multiple regression are reported in Table 10.

The model ANOVA results had an F-statistic of 4.496 with a p-value of 0.002, which was significant at 1% significance level, indicating that the model as a whole was a significant predictor of perceptions of girl education. The coefficients in Table 10 show that holding all the other factors constant or equal to zero, on average the score on the households would be 38.278 depicted by the constant. However, the most important results are the coefficients on the independent variables. Household total income was transformed to natural log so as to have sensible coefficients since logs would have lower figures than the raw income. The coefficient for log total income was found in the correlation results in Table 8. This means that the higher the income, the lower the score on the GEPI. A percentage change (being logs) in total income will lead to a 0.922 reduction in the GEPI score. The p-value for log total income was 0.000 which is significant at 1% significance level. Years of schooling for the head of household, which represented the level of education was also negative with

a coefficient of -0.6472 and significant at 10 % (p-value 0.06). The other variables were not significant explanatory variables of the variation in the GEPI.

**Table 10. Regression Results**

Variables	Unstandardised Coefficients		Standardised Coefficients		Sig
	B	Std. Error	B	t	
(Constant)	38.278	2.916		13.128	.000
Gender	.931	.998	.057	.932	.352
Age father	.006	.020	.017	.280	.780
Years of schooling of head of household	-6.472	3.503	-.113	-1.848	.066
Log total income	-.922	.259	-.217	-3.552	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Girl Education perception Index (GEPI)

The regression results, therefore, show that besides the broader categorisation considered in the cross-tabulation of the chi-square tests, it also found that education level and income level of households have an influence on the perceptions of girl education. Head of household with lower education levels and lower incomes scored higher on the GEPI while those with higher levels of education and higher incomes had a lower score.

## 6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The paper intended to look at the perceptions of the head of households in terms of what they think about girl education. The premise was on the basis that there still remains tendencies in communities that indicate the lack of support for girl education. Such issues of early marriage among girls, and usually by older men, the high levels of girl drop-out and other ills, continue to be found in the communities. The paper was, therefore, intended to find out what head of households think about girl education, and which categories of heads of household can be identified to be holding such perceptions. The way forward in improving the plight of the girls is by targeting the parents that hold these backward views and hence put in place mitigating processes that can change the situation. The paper makes the following observations: based on the cross-tabulations and the chi-square test, the people in the rural areas are the only ones that feel that girl education is not important. Among those, it is mostly the males. The correlation and the regression analysis revealed that further down in the household, those with lower income and lower education levels were also inclined to considered girl education as a waste of time as opposed to those with higher levels of both income and education. The implication is that

girls that are in households with lower incomes, and with parents that are not educated are at a disadvantage since they will receive less support or even discouragement in their educational pursuits. There is, therefore, a need to establish support for girl education beyond the household. Schools should have a support structure in place for girls that have no support at home. Also, it could be that those parents that do not think girl education to be important do so out of ignorance and lack of information. Hence, there is a need for civic education on the importance of girl education, especially in the rural areas where information is not commonly available.

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