



Research Article

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A Systematic Analysis of Malawi's Girl-Centred Education Programming

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Abstract

The aim of the systematic review was to compile and synthesise evidence on the contributions and implications of girl-centric policies and specialised interventions for girls' education in terms of access and participation. The results of the review confirm that girls' education programmes designed and implemented in a gender-based framework are effective in increasing girls' access to education. The results support the hypothesis that gender-centric policies and affirmative action interventions are sincere attempts to improve equity within education systems in Malawi. Despite these findings, the article argues that gender-centric policies and programmes can be replete with unfounded and contradicting assumptions about the nature of gender and egalitarian programming, which may negate the agenda on gender equality. The article also contends that even though great progress has been made in developing and adopting gender-sensitive education policies, feminist approaches have complicated implementation of the resulting gender-sensitive educational interventions. One of the main challenges in implementing feminist frameworks is in resolving the unquestioned and inconsistent assumptions about gender and egalitarian programming that have led to replication of affirmative action programmes that are only marginally effective. From the emanating perspectives, the article opines that general restorative interventions can be better approaches for overcoming gender inequality, and thus argues that girl-centric frameworks are unsustainable and must be supplanted with gender-as-equity paradigms.

Keywords: girls' education in Malawi; girl-centric education programmes

1. Introduction

Formal education is crucial for the development of girls' value systems and can lead to the emergence of good families, good societies, and eventually good nations (Portugal, 2014; Shenila Khoja-Moolji, 2015). Irrespective of the socioeconomic benefits, education is a human right that must be accessed equally regardless of gender (UN, 2015). This is why governments uphold human rights agreements that guarantee the right to education and acknowledge the importance of such agreements in their pursuit of economic growth and social reforms. Governments and the private sector have encouraged girls' education based on premises about the significance of educating females and offering of equal educational opportunities for both boys and girls. Nevertheless, gender inequality in the education sector in Malawi has been endemic (Robertson et al., 2017) with girls' educational attainment lagging behind boys. As Wilson (2010) wrote, there have been significant disparities in enrollment and graduation (completion) rates in favor of boys indicating that girls do not enjoy the same educational

chances as boys (Munthali, 2004). More boys than girls attend and finish secondary and higher education. Such disparities are impacted by negative sociocultural perceptions regarding female IQ, talents (abilities) and gendered roles (Durrani & Halai, 2020). However, since the advent of the Education for All agenda in 1990 and the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000, nations in Sub-Saharan African region adopted and are implementing girl-centric educational policies and affirmative action initiatives that ensure equitable education access for both girls and boys (DFID, 2005).

Malawi is one of the countries that has been advocating gender egalitarianism in education and has, through its development partners, been implementing several affirmative interventions aimed at promoting girls' education. Nonetheless, as noted by Robertson et al., 2017, there is a dearth of consolidated evidence about the extent to which egalitarian education policies and interventions have produced the desired shift. Employing a systematic literature review, this article pursued two questions on (1) how girl-centric policies and specialized girls' education interventions have contributed or are contributing to the country's education sector and (2) how this has impacted or is likely to impact girls' access to education.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Key Barriers to Girls' Education in Malawi

Education access and participation issues faced by girls in Malawi emanate from sociocultural, school environment affordances and economic factors (Robertson et al., 2017). The specific resulting problems from these factors include school-related gender-based violence; early or forced marriages; early pregnancies; poverty and financial hardships; lack of safe toilets, menstrual products and clean water at school; and gender norms and expectations (Wilson, 2010). Further, NGP (2015) cites socio-economic and cultural reasons such as male preference in communities, inadequate school facilities and resources, sexual abuse and harassment, and long distances to school, among others, as obstacles to achieving gender equality in education. While acknowledging the diversity of barriers to girls' education as explained above, Samati (2005) contends that the most significant barriers to girls' educational opportunities and outcomes are gendered cultural constraints that affect girls' lives which are rooted in hegemonic patriarchal beliefs and norms. Wilson (2010) agrees to this viewpoint, believing that patriarchal contexts and accompanying socializations are the source from which all other problems relating to girls' education stem. In summary and as the JPGE Proposal (2014) points out, girls in Malawi have to deal with a number of social, economic, health, and protection issues while trying to get an education. The document emphasizes on poverty, culture and traditions, unequal treatment of boys and girls, as well as the attitudes and actions of males, parents, teachers, and other community members, as being reasons for the low education participation and achievement by girls in Malawi.

2.2 Gender-Focused Education Policies in Malawi

Malawi's overarching objective is to reduce poverty, mainly with approaches that are premised on the role of education in national development (Maluwa-Banda, 2003; NEP, 2016)). This approach coupled with the belief in the importance of girls' education (Portugal, 2014; Shenila Khoja-Moolji, 2015) has been the reason for the development of gender-focused education policies that are seen as enablers of inclusive and high-quality education for all. Since the early 1990s, policies have been formulated to make it easier for girls to equally access education as boys with a number of educational programmes having specific gender goals and objectives being implemented since the mid-2000s (Wilson, 2010). Five examples of such policies are highlighted by Robertson et al. (2017) and include free primary education (FPE); national education sector plans; national girls' strategy; national girls' education communication strategy; and re-admission policy. All these policies, in part or entirely, aim at

levelling participation of both girls and boys in education.

The above listed gender-focused education policies were drawn from both regional and global policy frameworks including the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and SADC Protocol on Gender and Development (2008). For example, the 2030 agenda sees gender equality as essential to achieving sustainable development, and as a result, was designed to ensure gender mainstreaming in all the SDGs. Gender equality is a particularly significant SDG since it emphasizes the importance of inclusivity and lays out specific goals and plan for removing all social, cultural, economic, and political barriers to women's participation in development (UN, 2017). Also, the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development (2008) lays out a strong foundation for advocating the rights of girls and women in all circumstances and by all measures imaginable. Article 5, 11 and 14 of the Protocol, for instance, require all member states to implement affirmative action measures, with a focus on removing any barriers that impede girls from participating meaningfully in all sectors of life including education.

2.3 Girls Education Initiatives Programming

Diverse approaches and activities have been used to implement girls' education programmes and projects around the world and in different contexts. Broadly, however, Unterhalter et. al (2018) identifies three kinds of programming approaches which include: interventions that focus on resources and infrastructure; interventions with a focus on changing institutions; and interventions focusing on changing norms. Occasionally, however, a single intervention addresses many issues and so incorporates more than one or all of the approaches highlighted above. A cursory look at various affirmative action programmes in Malawi reveals use of all the three approaches indicated above, either as single approaches or conjoined approaches, depending on the targeted condition(s). The GABLE initiative, for example, integrated two approaches to transforming social norms and institutions (Hebert et. al, 2002). It focused on enhancing policy formulation to provide an enabling, gender-sensitive learning environment (Kendall, 2006). Through mindset-change programmes, it also prioritized altering of parental/community attitudes towards the significance of girls' education (Kendall, 2006) and improving social behaviors that impede girls' participation in education (Hebert et. al, 2002).

Similarly, the Joint Programme on Girls' Education (JPGE) combines all three broad approaches in one programme, based on the premise that there are numerous threats to girls' education, including complex contextual factors such as poverty, harmful cultural practices, gender inequalities, attitudes and behaviors of men, parents, teachers, and other community members towards girls, and negative attitudes and behaviors on the part of the girls themselves (JPGE, 2014). The case for the JPGE being a combined programme was also based on the premise that without a comprehensive approach that addresses all known barriers concurrently, girls may avoid one threat only to fall victim to another (JPGE, 2014).

Further, many publications, notably Haberland et al. (2018) and Evans & Yuan (2022), identify two approaches to intervention targeting: girl-centered and generic programmes. A programme is considered "girl-centered" if it either expressly targets girls for benefits or explicitly indicates that its goal is to improve girls' educational outcomes (Evans & Yuan, 2022). On the other hand, "general interventions" are programmes that are gender neutral in design such as those that provide school meals and distribute free school uniforms or textbooks to all students (Evans & Yuan, 2022). The contrast is in the fact that general interventions may disproportionately benefit female students, but they are not deliberately planned to do so, nor are they targeted exclusively to female students. Girl-centered approaches with explicit aims for enhancing girls' educational results have been common in Malawi. For example, the UK-Aid-funded Keeping Girls in School (KGIS), JPGE, GABLE, and CAMFED are all girl-centered programmes implemented as affirmative action programmes aimed at putting girls on equal footing with boys.

2.4 Contextualization of the Concept of “Affirmative Action Programmes”

Affirmative action is a somehow divisive issue because of its contentious nature. First introduced in the United States of America in 1941, affirmative action measures were meant to address the issue of racial and gender discrimination (Musingafi & Mafumbate, 2014). Since then, affirmative actions have served different purposes in different contexts. Although there is plurality of purpose, Bagde, Epple and Taylor (2016) believe that affirmative action programmes are a way of addressing society's legacy of discrimination and marginalization through policies that aim to improve the diversity of people selected for developmental opportunities, including employment and education. The primary principle that emerges from this perspective is that a disadvantaged group must be given special or preferential treatment. Generally, speaking an organization or institution has an affirmative action policy in place when it takes reasonable steps to remedy any prior discriminatory behavior (Bagde, Epple and Taylor, 2016).

As noted earlier in this article, historically there have been large inequalities in enrollment and graduation rates in favor of boys, who more than girls, attend and complete secondary and higher education, showing that girls do not have the same educational opportunities as boys (Samati, 2007). In this regard, the purpose of affirmative action programmes has been to help the disadvantaged group (girls) reach levels where they can compete on an equal footing with boys who have had long-term advantages (Durrani & Halai, 2020). Even though affirmative action programmes seem well-intentioned, they are not without criticism. Davidson and Burke (2000) and Makamure (1995) argue that affirmative action programmes are unjust, they do not resolve inherent gender inequality issues. Davidson and Burke (2000) contend that if girls are viewed as having distinct requirements, it may indicate that they have special needs and that they are different and inferior to boys. Makamure (1995) too asserts that affirmative action programmes, as commonly implemented, not only discriminate against boys, but also diminish girls' intellectual ability by thinking that girls are cognitively inferior.

3. Review Method

The article adopted systematic review, a protocol-driven and quality-focused method for discovering, analyzing, and synthesizing significant topical literature (Bearman, 2012). As this paper seeks to bring research closer to decision-making, it can benefit from systematic literature review which employs rigorous and precise procedures to synthesize primary research findings in order to ensure sufficient explanations to an issue at hand (Thomas & Harden, 2008). The author sought out review papers, academic articles, empirically research pieces, and background studies relevant to girl-centric education programmes and policies. The publications were searched using digital research mapping tools "Elicit" and "Connected Papers" which leverage language models to automate particular aspects of research articles. The two research mapping tools enabled the author to locate documents in relevant journals for reading online or downloading for offline reference.

Selected documents included girl-centric reports, updates, and reviews about girls' education initiatives and gender policies within the education context. The initial selection of articles was narrowed to those that were published after the year 2000. However, a document was deemed to be girl-centric if it satisfied at least two of the following four criteria: (1) the described program(s) particularly targeted or aimed to reach girls; (2) the document featured content relevant to girls' education only; (3) the document highlighted a programme meant to address girl-specific educational needs or concerns; and (4) the publication reviewed and addressed girls' educational outcomes. Using the aforementioned criteria, ten (10) papers were selected and included in the review, as indicated in Table 1 below.

Table 1: List of Documents Selected for the Review

Author	Document Title	Year of Publication	Paper Type
Wilson, H.	Education and Girls' Development in Malawi: Promotion of Girls' Education in Relation to Sustainable Development	2010	Thesis
Unterhalter, E. et. al.	Interventions to Enhance Girls' Education and Gender Equality	2014	Review Paper
Evans & Yuan	What we Learn About Girls' Education from Interventions that Do Not Focus on Girls.	2022	Review Paper
Maluwa-Banda, D.	Gender Sensitive Educational Policy and Practice: The Case of Malawi	2004	Background Paper
Robertson, S.	Girls' Primary and Secondary Education in Malawi: Sector Report	2017	Empirical Paper
Haberland, N	Insights and Evidence Gaps in Girl-Centred Programming: A Systematic Review	2018	Review Paper
Kadzamira, E	Malawi's Experience in Promoting Girls' Education	2003	Background Paper
CSEC	Assessment of Progress Made in Increasing Girls' Education Access	2014	Empirical Study
Samati, M.	At the Interface of Policy and Cultural Change	2007	Review Paper
King & Winthrop	Today's Challenge for Girls' Education	2015	Empirical Study

In terms of data analysis and out of the requirement to address questions concerning the contributions and effectiveness of girls' education affirmative initiatives, the author employed Thomas & Harden's (2008) technique of thematic synthesis. Text coding, formation of descriptive themes, and the generation of analytic themes constituted the three critical stages of the procedure. As can be seen in Table 2, three descriptive themes defining the focus of interventions were established: resources and infrastructure; institutions and policy; and norms and inclusion. The analysis of the three themes generated two interpretive themes, namely, key activities and impact areas, which provided the basis for the report's results.

Table 2: Descriptive and Analytical Themes

Focus of Interventions	Key Activities	Areas of Impact
Resources and Infrastructure	Conditional cash transfers Construction of new school blocks School meals Integrated water, sanitation and hygiene interventions Menstrual supplies	Reduction of early pregnancies and marriages Positive impact on girls' enrolment (distance issues) Positive impact on attendance
Institutions and Policy	Gender-sensitive pedagogy trainings for teachers Inclusive teaching methods Community mobilization Girl-friendly schools Employment of female teachers	Reducing girl-students' dropouts Influence on girls' participation Supporting girls' learning outcomes Empowerment
Norms And Inclusion	Sex and sexuality education Complementary learning spaces for girls Safe school programmes Women's literacy programmes	Transformation of gender norms and identities Reduction of gender-based violence Transition to tertiary education

Also, the same thematic analysis procedures were used to explore into the concept of intervention targeting, with evaluations of girl-centric versus general interventions made. The same 10 studies presented in Table 1 served as a foundation for comparison.

4. Findings

4.1 Findings on Interventions that Focus on Provision of Resources and Infrastructure

The review established a link between the introduction of Free Primary Education and affordances of the schools' physical environment. FPE policy was implemented in order to accomplish the Education for All (EFA) goals for 2015, which were agreed upon at the Jomtien Conference in 1990 and consisted

of six goals aimed at providing education to every member of society, particularly girls (Maluwa-Banda, 2003). In implementing EFA goals and focusing on quantitative growth, FPE programmes in Malawi emphasized the elimination of fees and uniforms and the mass production/distribution of textbooks. However, as Kadzamira (2003) and Wilson (2010) observed, the introduction of FPE in 1994 imposed enormous strain on schools, as rising enrollments necessitated the expansion of school blocks and hiring of additional temporary teachers.

Further and as a ripple effect, FPE resulted in increasing primary-to-secondary transition rates, necessitating the expansion of secondary schools through the establishment of Community Day Secondary Schools (CDSSs) and hiring of unqualified teachers to address the challenge of teacher shortages (Kadzamira, 2003). All of these quantitative expansions required the Government of Malawi (GoM) to fund, but this has been an arduous task (McJessie-Kabwila, 2002). Thus, since the implementation of FPE and establishment of CDSSs, the Ministry of Education and its partners have been conducting interventions that focus on resources and facilities in response to the financing imbalance and its effects on educational access and quality.

According to Unterhalter et. al. (2018), the majority of interventions have included activities such as construction of new school blocks, provision of school meals, implementation of integrated water, sanitation, and hygiene interventions, conditional cash transfers for girls, and provision of menstrual supplies for girls. These initiatives have typically been conceived in the framework of equitable access to education (Maluwa-Banda, 2003) and aimed to prevent early pregnancies and marriages and impact girls' enrolment and attendance in school (Unterhalter et. al., 2018).

Resource and infrastructure initiatives have had varied effects on the participation, learning, and empowerment of girls. As Unterhalter et. al (2018) noted, the efficacy of resource interventions has been contingent on the precise targeting of educationally under resourced families and the intentional design of programmes that prioritize the most at risk girls. On the other hand, the efficacy of infrastructure interventions is improved when they are integrated with learning and teaching activities. In terms of impact, Haberland (2018) observed that interventions focusing on the distribution of resources and infrastructure were more likely to be associated with improvements in girls' attendance, enrollment, and transition than with girls' empowerment within broader gender equality outcomes.

4.2 *Findings on Interventions that Focus on Transforming Institutions and Policy*

To attain gender equality, Durrani and Halai (2020) propose that educational initiatives must be supported by laws and policies. According to Maluwa-Banda (2003), applicable laws and policies regarding girls' education in Malawi have included gender-sensitive pedagogy training for teachers, use of inclusive teaching methods, and recruitment of female teachers. Institutional considerations, on the other hand, have included community mobilization initiatives and the construction of girl-friendly schools (Wilson, 2010). These policy initiatives have been anticipated to lower the number of girls who drop out of school, influence girls' participation in education, improve their learning outcomes, and empower them (Unterhalter et. al., 2018). Institutional wise, Robertson et al. (2017) believes that a community as an institution is where change must begin if girls' education is to overcome a range of barriers, significantly in relation to reducing class repetition and dropout rates and bolstering graduation rates. Robertson et al. (2017) further points out to the observation that through several intervention reports, a number of Malawian stakeholders collaborated on the requirement to promote community relations in order to foster an atmosphere conducive to girls' education.

In relation to school transformation, Unterhalter et. al. (2018) emphasized the significance of thriving teachers who are sufficiently supported to improve girls' schooling through reflection on attitudes and in-service continuing professional development. Whereas Wilson (2010) suggested that sufficient resources for gender mainstreaming at various levels of the education system can facilitate the incorporation of gender perspectives inside educational institutions. As can be insinuated,

effective interventions are connected with a combination of several different methods. Therefore, stakeholders should be concerned with gender equality in teaching, learning, and management; attention to curriculum, learning materials, and pedagogical practices for schools and classrooms; and close attention to local contexts Unterhalter et. al. (2018). In short, these findings demonstrate that successful interventions connected with institutional transformation and policy in the education sector may more generally have an effect on gender equality outcomes (Unterhalter et. al., 2018; Wilson, 2010).

4.3 Findings on Interventions that Focus of Norms and Fostering of Inclusion

A proposed strategy for delivering behavior modification interventions based on social or peer norms emerges clearly from Robertson et al. (2017). The implicit or explicit standards that a group utilizes to determine values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors are what are referred to as social norms. Therefore, a social norms intervention, in the case of affirmative education programmes, aims to modify a community's behavior patterns by exposing its members to positive values, beliefs, attitudes, or behaviors that support girls' education. Social norms interventions can be used as a stand-alone behavior change strategy with a wide reach and implemented on a continuous basis across communities and contexts at a low cost, leading in a significant comparative impact (Samati, 2007).

An important finding regarding interventions aimed at modifying social conventions and fostering inclusion, as informed by Samati (2007) and Robertson et al. (2017), is increasing the involvement of marginalised groups in decision-making. Nevertheless, as Unterhalter et. al. (2018) indicate, additional research is needed to ascertain if whether involvement of disadvantaged groups in decision-making does have a beneficial impact on the rate of girls' access and participation in education. While agreeing to inclusion of marginalized groups in decision making, Samati (2007), cites gender interventions that work with girls' clubs, religious communities, and males as promising strategies for supporting both behavioural change and fostering inclusion.

4.4 Findings in Relation to Intervention Targeting

The evidence gathered throughout the review indicate that affirmative educational initiatives in Malawi, such as GABLE and JPGE, have generally embraced girl-centric programming, which according to Evans & Yuan (2022) results in gender inequality. For example, due to its emphasis on girls, the majority of JPGE activities were geared toward girls (JPGE, 2017). This selective targeting had negatively impacted the perception boys had towards the programme, with feelings of alienation and neglect openly expressed. As a result, many experts have questioned whether girl-centric approaches to targeting are indeed in accord with human-rights-centered programming meant to provide equal chances for both girls and boys (Unterhalter et. al., 2018). Notwithstanding this reality, however, the majority of affirmative action programmes have been seen to use collaborative approaches that combine more than one intervention. Such targeting has proven to be extremely effective in addressing the most fundamental obstacles to girls' education. For example, for its collaborative approach as well as the pooling and targeted use of resources, the JPGE, has been acknowledged as a model for facilitating the simultaneous elimination of multiple barriers to girls' education (JPGE, 2017).

5. Discussion of Results

As evidenced by the reviewed publications, a significant corpus of literature highlights the importance of girls' education as a fundamental human right and a critical driver of a nation's economic and social development (Portugal, 2014; Shenila Khoja-Moolji, 2015). This viewpoint is supported by governments as well as education funders, including the World Bank, and serves as a foundation for the development and implementation of affirmative action

programmes for girls' education around the world (Robertson et al., 2017). Adopting diverse approaches stemming primarily from girl-centric as opposed to gender-as-equity assumptions (Kendall, 2006), implemented affirmative action programmes on girls' education in Malawi have delivered varied outcomes in various locations and contexts. Stemming from this finding, the significance of context and impossibility of a single solution that works flawlessly in all contexts to promote girls' education must be underscored (Wilson, 2010). Thus, as Samati (2007) points out, stakeholders must constantly modify and adapt initiatives depending on the unique context affordances consequential of the fact that advocating for girls' education is a complicated matter that requires thoughtful consideration of local circumstances.

The review's findings also highlighted that girl-centered programmes have grown quite common in Malawi. As demonstrated by the findings, there is little question that the employed girl-centric approaches achieved some good outcomes (Unterhalter et al., 2018). For instance, through the adoption of girl-only approaches, significant progress toward gender equality has been made in the early years of primary school in which girls make up the majority of pupils (Robertson et al., 2017). However, based on the findings of the literature analysis, it has also been discovered that, while girl-centric approaches are commended for their efficacy in influencing change, they are incompatible with human rights-based programming. Some sections of society interpret the approaches as potential grounds for discriminating against boys and, as a result, oppose them. This was also a conclusion of Forde (2014), who stated that girl-centric policies and programmes might be riddled with unquestioned and inconsistent assumptions about the nature of gender and gender programmes.

Notwithstanding the positive effects of girl-centric initiatives, a growing body of research has shown that the as girls progress through school years, their enthusiasm and engagement to schoolwork tends to wane, culminating in absurdly low graduation and transition rates (Jones, 2011). The tendency is not shocking given the multiple barriers girls experience in school settings, including teachers' preference for male pupils and stereotypes against female students, as well as the prevalence of books that highlight stories and pictures portraying men in positions of leadership (Wilson, 2010), which tend to limit girls' aspirations. Moreover, as Samati (2007) remarked, social-cultural norms replicated at the school level perpetuate gender roles and responsibilities, compounding gender inequality and encouraging gender-based violence. In light of these findings, it is apparent that programmes designed specifically for girls fall short of providing the kind of support and encouragement required for educational achievement Samati (2007). Based on these findings, I argue that increasing the number of girls in school is a suboptimal achievement which must be complemented by better and more stimulating educational experiences. This argument presupposes adoption of all-inclusive or whole-school approaches in affirmative action programming as these take everyone on board and ensure support for girls.

Learning from the findings and observations of the review, a key recommendation that comes out for policymakers and girl education programme developers in countries where both sexes face educational obstacles is the opting of educational initiatives that benefit both girls and boys. This recommendation is more than a human rights issue but a cost-cutting one. A World Bank-commissioned study by Evans and Yuan (2019) reveals that general interventions aimed at fostering access to education and performance in school are on average as effective as those aimed specifically at girls. This finding means that girls and boys respond to broad interventions in the same way. It appears, however, that girls benefit more from general interventions than boys despite the fact that the disparities are not statistically significant Forde (2014). This finding provides policymakers with a cost-effective option when trying to promote girls' education. The findings on the consequences for gender inequality and the cost-effectiveness of affirmative programmes imply that non-targeted general interventions may be more politically and economically acceptable for scaling up because of their broader scope (Evans & Yuan, 2019). From this line of thought, I argue that gender-based concerns in the design of programmes may not necessarily be a deterrent, and thus may not always be necessary to openly target girls in order to achieve access and quality for them. Gender equality

does not necessitate a gender-targeted programme.

Based on the review's findings and insights, it can be argued that countries where both sexes face almost comparable challenges and obstacles may benefit more from educational initiatives that benefit both girls and boys. Because gender-based obstacles are not always impediments to girls' education, it may not always be essential to expressly target girls in order to achieve access and quality for them. The perspective is premised on much more than simply human rights as it is also about implementing the value for money principle. It is also consistent with Evans and Yuan's (2019) findings which suggest that broad interventions supporting access to school and educational attainment are on average as helpful as those focusing just on girls. Forde, (2014) agrees by stating that while the differences may not be statistically significant, girls benefit more from general interventions than boys. The perspective offers policymakers a cost-effective option for supporting girls' education but also implies that non-targeted general initiatives may be more politically and economically acceptable for scaling up due to their broader scope (Evans & Yuan, 2019).

6. Conclusion

This review aimed to consolidate evidence on issues regarding the contributions and impact of girl-centric policies and specialized interventions for girls' education in relation to access and participation. The review's findings recognize programmes for the education of girls conceived and implemented within a gender-based framework as an effective strategy for enhancing girls' access to education. The findings agree to the notion that gender-centric policies and affirmative action initiatives are unquestionably sincere efforts to address issues of equity within educational systems. Nonetheless, I argue that gender policies and programmes can be replete with unsubstantiated and contradictory assumptions about the nature of gender and egalitarian programming, throwing gender equality issues into question. I further contend that while significant progress has been achieved with regard to the development and adoption of gender-sensitive educational policies, the implementation of these policies has been compromised by feminist approaches. With feminist implementation frameworks, addressing the unquestioned and contradictory assumptions about the nature of gender and gender programming has been the biggest hurdle ending up in reproduction of affirmative action programmes that are somewhat ineffectual. The gathered evidence suggests that while gender inequality in education in Malawi can be addressed progressively through restorative interventions, girl-centric frameworks are unsustainable and must be substituted with gender-as-equality paradigms.

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