

Awareness and Perceptions of the National Girls' Education Strategy among School-Level Stakeholders: Implications for Policy Implementation

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Abstract

Achieving gender equality in and through education is at the heart of the human rights agenda, a pathway to social justice and the key to achieving the transformational 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Global Partnership for Education [GPE], 2019) To this end, global and national education frameworks emphasize the importance of gender-responsive policies. In Malawi, the Ministry of Education (MoE) introduced the National Girls' Education Strategy (NGES) in 2014, among other interventions, to guide efforts in promoting quality girls' education, equity, and inclusion. Despite a revised NGES in 2018, many Malawian girls still face challenges in accessing, retaining, and completing education at all levels. Yet, literature on the implementation of the NGES remains limited. In addition, effective implementation requires interpretation and execution by stakeholders at all levels. However, implementation challenges at school-levels remain underexplored. Recent studies have underscored the importance of school-level stakeholders in policy development and implementation, noting that institutional-level policy change is often complex and non-linear. In this regard, this study explored the level of awareness of school-level stakeholders and their perceptions regarding the implementation of the revised NGES in two public secondary schools within the Bwaila cluster in Lilongwe. The study was guided by Honig's (2006) three-dimensional theory of education policy implementation. A qualitative case study design was employed. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with head teachers and teachers, Focus Group Discussions (FDGs) with students, and document analysis. Thematic analysis revealed low level of awareness of the NGES among the school stakeholders, varying perceptions about the NGES, unavailability of the NGES document in schools, inadequate resources and funding, lack of on-going support and sensitization efforts at school and community levels. Notwithstanding these challenges, the findings highlight the need to explore how "informal institutional practices" shape the implementation outcomes, particularly, of education policies aimed at promoting gender equality.

Keywords: Gender-responsive education policy, Policy implementation, Stakeholder perceptions.

Introduction

The pivotal and transformative role of education as a building block of every nation and the pathway to equitable societies is elaborated in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948) which asserts that “Everyone has the right to education”. Yet, discrimination and inequality prevent many children from accessing it (UNESCO, 2018). Regionally, human rights frameworks, such as, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child of African Union (Organization of African Unity, 1990) Article 3 outlaws discrimination in education on the basis of gender, race, ethnic group, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national and social origin, fortune, birth or other status. Malawi, as a signatory to these international and regional instruments, is committed to the implementation of all its legal frameworks and policies on non-discrimination and equality in education as guided by the African Union Agenda 2063 (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2020).

Despite legal protections and significant progress over the past two decades, girls remain more likely than boys to never set foot in a classroom. As of 2023, an estimated 122 million girls are out of school globally, compared to 128 million boys (UNICEF, 2025). This data reflects significant progress over the past three decades, where previously more girls than boys were out of school at every level worldwide. However, challenges remain, particularly at the secondary education level, where progress has slowed since 2011. Additionally, regional disparities persist, with Sub-Saharan Africa experiencing an increase in the number of children out of school due to a complex interplay of social and cultural norms, economic and political factors, including poverty, conflict and crises, such as, pandemics and natural disasters (Ibid). According to data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics [UIS], (2023), approximately one-third of youth aged 12 to 14 are out of school, and nearly 60 percent of those aged 15 to 17 are not enrolled in any educational institution. Gender disparities in education emerge early: 23 percent of primary school-age girls are out of school compared to 19 percent of boys. These disparities widen with age, with 36 percent of adolescent girls excluded from education compared to 32 percent of boys (UIS, 2023).

Global trends increasingly recognize education not only as a fundamental human right but also as a key driver of human development, opening doors to greater opportunities and expanded freedoms, particularly for adolescent girls, including those living in crisis and conflict-affected settings (UNESCO, 2021). Over the past three decades, a series of global education frameworks, such as the Beijing Platform for Action (1995), Education for All (EFA), the Education 2030 Framework for Action, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), have emphasized the importance of gender equality in and through education. These frameworks advocate for gender-responsive policies, the integration of gender issues into teacher training and curricula, and the eradication of gender-based discrimination and violence within educational institutions (UNESCO, 2022; UN Women, 2020).

In response, many countries, especially in developing countries, have developed and implemented various policy interventions aimed at creating inclusive and equitable school environments. Schools that adopt gender-responsive education policies often report significant positive outcomes. These include reductions in Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and its associated consequences, such as increased absenteeism, school dropout, and psychological trauma (Greene, Jolly & Owen, 2013). Additionally, such interventions contribute to a more supportive school climate, enhanced student well-being, and higher rates of school re-entry for adolescent mothers following pregnancy (UNESCO, 2022). These outcomes demonstrate the critical role gender-responsive education policies play in transforming schools into safe and

empowering spaces for all learners. While many African governments have developed policies and legal frameworks aimed at increasing enrolment, retention, and completion rates in education, effective implementation remains a significant challenge. The implementation process is often compromised or inconsistently applied due to several interrelated factors.

A Brief Background on Girls' Education Strategies in Africa.

Globally and across Africa, significant strides have been made toward improving girls' access to education, yet deep-rooted gender inequalities persist. While international frameworks, such as, the SDGs, have catalysed action to promote gender equality in education, many girls, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, continue to face systemic barriers including poverty, early marriage, and cultural norms that hinder school attendance and completion. In response, gender-responsive policies have been introduced to ensure all learners have equal opportunities to learn and to eliminate gender stereotypes in classrooms. However, evidence suggests a persistent gap between the intended goals of such policies and the actual progress achieved in schools and classrooms (Sykes, Schneider & Plank, 2012; Bakshi, 2015; Nabbuye, 2018; Tao, 2018; Tarus, 2020). Challenges often lie in translating gender-sensitive pedagogical policies into practice at the school level. Tao (2018) contends that even when gender-responsive policies and systems are present, they frequently fail due to weaknesses at the district and national levels, such as, poorly drafted, inadequately disseminated, or weakly enforced policies. For instance, in Uganda, consultative discussions conducted with the Uganda Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) and stakeholders indicated a very limited level of awareness about the existence and utilization of the Uganda National Strategy for Girls' Education to guide promotion of girls' education in Uganda (Ministry of Education and Sports [MoES], 2013). The majority of national level actors indicated that they have only heard about the strategy but have never used it to guide their activities. At the district and school level, the NSGE for Uganda remained completely unheard of. Similarly, in Ethiopia, a study facilitated by UNICEF (2007) reported that limited policy implementation capacity of institutions is one of the causes for low enrolment and achievement level of girls in education. In addition, When Ethiopia adopted its first girls' education strategies in 2010, the challenges to policy implementation persisted. In its implementation plan, while addressing the policy and system level barriers to girls' education, the Ethiopia NGES emphasized strengthened effort and cooperative work of all stakeholders at all levels for effective implementation (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2010). Furthermore, South Sudan developed its first Girls Education Strategy for the planning period of 2015-2017 (Republic of South Sudan, 2015). The South Sudan MoEST, indicated in the strategy document that while the education sector of the country had a number of policies in place promoting girl education, challenges with implementation remained. The South Sudan MoEST further calls for strengthening of education policy implementation in the country through capacity building of all stakeholders, advocacy, boosting print production and the creation of manuals, among other activities (Republic of South Sudan, Ministry of Education, 2015). Correspondingly, since its adoption in 2014, anecdotal evidence shows that information on the Malawi NGES is scarce, particularly, about its implementation at school-level.

Background to the revised Malawi NGES

Over the past two decades, the Government of Malawi has made notable progress in advancing equity and inclusion within the education sector. International organizations, such as the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2019), have recognized Malawi's efforts to develop and implement policies aimed at improving access to and participation in education, particularly for marginalized and disadvantaged groups. One of the significant achievements has been the

increased enrolment of girls in primary education. However, substantial gender disparities persist, particularly, at secondary school level, where challenges related to access, retention, and completion continue to disproportionately affect girls (UNESCO, 2021). According to the 2023 Malawi MoE's Education Management Information System (EMIS) Statistics Report, the Net Enrolment Rate (NER) for secondary education has remained consistently low, staying below 20 percent over the past five years (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2023a). Approximately 83 percent of the official secondary school-age population lack access to secondary education, indicating a significant gap in educational provision. Notably, females have maintained a slightly higher NER compared to their male counterparts. For the 2022/23 academic year, the NER was 17.1 percent for girls and 16.9 percent for boys. Despite this marginal advantage in enrolment, male students demonstrated higher completion rates, with 24.0 percent completing secondary education compared to 20.9 percent of female students, according to MoE (2023a) data. These disparities highlight the need for targeted interventions, such as the NGES to address the persistent gender gaps in Malawi's education system.

In an effort to address the challenges facing girls' education, the Government of Malawi launched the NGES in 2014, which was subsequently revised for the period 2018-2023. The revised NGES was developed through a consultative process which targeted school, community, district and national level stakeholders in Girls' Education. The revised NGES (2018-2023) continued to draw from the existing legal and policy frameworks on girls' education. These include international policy frameworks mentioned above, as well as, national frameworks, such as, the Education Act, The National Education Sector Investment Plan (NESIP), the Inclusive education strategy, the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy (MGDs) and the Gender Equality Act. At the heart of the Malawi NGES are five priority areas which were drafted after consultations at the national level and outlines anticipated outcomes, strategies and activities for achieving them in each level of education. These are; improved learning outcomes for girls, reducing Socio-cultural factors affecting girls' education, integrating Sexual and Reproductive Health rights into schools, improved socio-economic factors for girls and enhanced implementation of all girls' policies and supportive systems. The revised NGES also contains an implementation plan which stipulates the roles of various stakeholders. The MoE through the Girls Education secretariat (based in Secondary School Directorate) takes the leading role in the implementation of the NGES. The Secretariat is headed by the National Coordinator and comprises a Technical committee. The roles and responsibilities of MoE include; intensifying awareness on all girls' policies and supportive systems, strengthening capacity building in girls' education. On the other hand, roles of schools include; documenting and keeping records on girls' education issues, collaborating with local communities and stakeholders to support girls' education, reporting and handling systems for GBV. Roles and responsibilities for learners, both girls and boys, include; providing peer to peer support, assisting to identify girls that dropped out of school and those who have never been to school, reporting any cases of abuse (including GBV) or discrimination to teachers and participating in girls' education activities to promote awareness. A monitoring and evaluation framework follow the implementation plan. Despite these policy commitments and intended outcomes, progress on girls' education in the country is still not encouraging. Previous studies on girls' education in Malawi (e.g., Robertson, Cassity & Kunkwenzu, 2017; Chikhungu, Kadzamira, Chiwaula & Meke, 2020; GPE 2021) accentuate persistent barriers such as poverty, long distances to school, and school-related GBV. Additionally, national crises such as COVID-19 pandemic, cyclone Freddy, have further widened existing gender disparities, school closures and their associated disruptions have contributed to rising dropout rates among adolescent girls, driven by factors including early pregnancies and child marriages (UNESCO, 2021; Kafulatira, 2024). These ongoing challenges reveal significant gender gaps in education

and in the effective implementation of gender-responsive policies, particularly at the school level.

Considerable research on gender-responsive policy implementation in education in Malawi, (e.g., Samati, 2013; (Civil Society Education Coalition [CSEC], 2014); ; FAWE, 2020) have predominantly focused on the Re-admission policy, which allows adolescent mothers to return to school after childbirth, as a lens into understanding implementation of gender-responsive policies in Malawian schools. These studies, however, have emphasized the critical roles of all stakeholders in policy development and implementation, sensitization, community engagement, and institutional support in realizing policy objectives. Yet, there remains a significant gap in empirical research concerning the awareness and perceptions of stakeholders about the NGES, particularly, at school-level. Additionally, although the implementation of the NGES spans all levels of formal education in Malawi, this study focused specifically on the secondary level. This focus is supported by evidence that gender disparities often intensify during adolescence, commonly manifesting through higher dropout rates, early pregnancies, and school-related gender-based violence (UNICEF, 2025). Secondary schools, therefore, represent a crucial point for assessing how gender-responsive policies like the NGES are put into practice. This study, therefore, addresses that gap by exploring the perspectives of teachers, head teachers, and students within the Bwaila Cluster in Lilongwe. The findings aim to contribute to literature on NGES implementation and enrich the broader discourse on implementation of gender-responsive education policies in Malawi.

Education Policy Implementation and Influential Factors

In the field of education, policy implementation is a complex term which has different meanings for different people. Fullan (2015) defines education policy implementation as the process of putting into practice an idea, program, or set of active ideas and structures new to the people attempting or expected to change. Similarly, Viennet & Pont (2017) define education policy implementation as a purposeful and multidirectional change process aiming to put a specific policy or strategy into practice, which may affect an education system on several levels. In reality, policy implementation research 'does not fully examine all implementers'; therefore, conducting critical policy implementation studies in different contexts provides new insights about policy implementation and research on implementation (Lewis & Young, 2015).

Previous studies have reported several factors that affect the implementation of education policies. One of the persistent challenges in education policy implementation is the so-called "implementation gap", a concept extensively modelled by Reynolds & Saunders (1987) and later elaborated by Rattray, Jackson, and Dunlap (2013) through the metaphor of the *implementation staircase*. They showed how the location of individuals and stakeholder groups in the hierarchy of the policy process (from national policy makers to institutional leaders) consequently create an implementation gap as policy is deflected during its trajectory down and up the staircase. The gap subsequently impedes the successful implementation of policy. This model illustrates how the hierarchical positioning of individuals and stakeholders from national policymakers to institutional leaders contributes to a disconnect between policy formulation and execution. As the policy descends and ascends through these layers, it is often reshaped, diluted, or distorted, thereby creating an *implementation gap* that hinders effective policy delivery (Delaney, 2017). Further supporting this perspective, Pülzl and Treib (2017) examined reasons behind policy failures, especially in the education sector. They observed that there is often a substantial divide between policy theory, what is documented in official policy and actual practice, and what happens in schools and classrooms. They identify common

challenges such as unclear directives, insufficient resources, and lack of capacity among implementers. In many cases, frontline educators may be unaware of their expected roles or lack the necessary knowledge and tools to implement policy effectively.

A growing body of research corroborates these observations. Studies, such as, (Honig, 2006; Fullan, 2015; Adams, 2016; Viennet & Pont, 2017) highlight that education policy implementation is inherently complex and influenced by multiple, often conflicting factors. Research in this vein demonstrates that even at institutional level, effecting policy change is by no means simple or straightforward. These scholars emphasize that successful implementation requires a nuanced understanding of local contexts, stakeholder perceptions, and institutional capacities. Moreover, Viennet and Pont (2017) assert that policy implementation is shaped by dynamic interactions between central authorities and local actors, including school boards, principals, and teachers. Adams (2016) further argues that although major educational policies are typically developed at higher levels of governance, their success is contingent upon support and action at the grassroots. Furthermore, education researchers have reported that ambiguity in policy often influences the success of its implementation and the extent to which results can be replicated across different contexts (McLaughlin, 1987; Spillane *et al.*, 2002, Honig, 2006). These scholars also emphasize that effective communication and clear policy objectives are critical for successful implementation. In the absence of such clarity, different stakeholders may develop divergent interpretations of the policy's goals (Tee, 2008). Additionally, researchers have reported that lack of information (Muthanna & Sang, 2023), insufficient consultation with intended beneficiaries, lack of reliable data to monitor and evaluate the real-world impact of these policies, inadequate resource allocation and limited political will among government leaders often result in these otherwise critical initiatives being deprioritized or shelved, undermining their potential to drive meaningful educational progress (UNESCO, 2022).

Education policy studies have been cognizant that stakeholders at the school level, including teachers, school administrators, parents, and local communities, play a crucial role in the successful implementation of education reforms (e.g., Lerman, 2012; Fawe, 2018). They recognize that change is an organic process that needs to engage those on the ground. As “frontline professionals”, teachers are directly responsible for the implementation of educational policy to its intended beneficiaries (Lerman, 2012). Likewise, Fawe (2018) in a toolkit developed for teachers and schools observed that teachers have a key role in engaging stakeholders, especially those directly involved with the school such as students and parents. However, they have also demonstrated that these implementers do not always do as told nor do they always act to maximize policy objectives. According to Asbury & Kim, (2020), teachers have often been labelled as “resistant to change,” or just simply lazy when they ignore or subvert innovations. Meanwhile, Coburn, Hill & Spillane (2016) looked at the situation in a different light, explaining that this is because implementers at school-level often lack the capacity (knowledge, skills, personnel and other resources) necessary to work in ways that are consistent with policy. They warned that even if implementers construct understandings that reflect national policymakers’ intent, they may not be aware of or have the necessary skills and resources to do what they understand the policy to be asking of them. Similarly, Parkes, Thorsen & Johnson (2016) posits that teachers and school administrators may lack training, awareness, or incentives to enforce these policies.

It is against this background that this paper intends to play a crucial role in enhancing the general discourse on education policy implementation. By exploring the awareness and perceptions of school stakeholders regarding the revised NGES within the Bwaila Cluster in Lilongwe, the study seeks to generate context-specific insights into the practical realities of

policy uptake at the school level. In doing so, it contributes to the growing body of knowledge on gender and education policy by highlighting the implementation of the NGES in Malawi. The findings are expected to provide valuable feedback that not only supports improved implementation of the NGES but also informs the design and refinement of gender-responsive education policies in similar contexts.

In this regard, two research questions were explored;

- i. What is the awareness of secondary school head teachers, teachers and students about the Malawi NGES in Bwaila cluster, Lilongwe?
- ii. How do secondary school head teachers, teachers and students perceive the Malawi NGES to be implemented in Bwaila cluster, Lilongwe?

Key school stakeholders in this study included, Head teachers, teachers and students.

Theoretical Framework

Honig's Three-Dimensional Theory to Educational Policy Implementation.

The study was guided by a synthesized theory of educational policy implementation developed by Honig (2006), which emphasizes the complexity of policy implementation through the interconnected influences of policy, people, and places. This theory was chosen because it challenges previous fundamental approaches of top-down and bottom-up, that mainly focused on what happens to a policy after its formulation (Birkland, 2001).

Honig (2006) outlines three generations of education policy implementation research from the 1960s to the 1990s. The first generation (1960s–70s) focused on what gets implemented, favouring a top-down approach where national policymakers were seen as the key actors Sabatier & Mazmanian (1979). The second generation (1970s) emphasized implementation over time, advocating a bottom-up perspective that highlighted the role of local actors (Lipsky, 1980). The third generation (1980s) responded to changing policy demands, emphasizing the interplay of policy, people, and places. Scholars argued for moving beyond the policy-maker and implementer divide, recognizing both as crucial in shaping implementation (Honig, 2006). It is clear that the goals of the first and second generation approaches of education policy implementation are different, thus, it is relevant to take both into account.

Hence, the choice of a synthesized approach by Honig (2006). This integrated perspective is particularly relevant for exploring school stakeholder awareness and perceptions of the revised NGES in Malawi. Hotteinstein (2017) further suggests that contemporary models, such as Honig's, understand the importance of top-down aspects such as centrally defined policy decision, but also appreciate and value the need to involve lower-level actors. According to Honig (2006), education policy implementation involves three dimensions: policy (design, goals, and tools), people (stakeholders), and places (physical and organizational contexts). This study used Honig's framework to explore how these dimensions interact in the implementation of the NGES in Bwaila Cluster, Lilongwe. Given the complexity of policy implementation, Honig emphasizes the need for strong empirical and theoretical guides to help navigate this challenging terrain. This assertion underscores the relevance of this study in informing gender-responsive education policy implementation. The framework guided the selection of sites, data collection tools and analysis.

Methodology

Research Design

The study was conducted in the Bwaila Cluster, located within the Central West Education Division (CWED) in Lilongwe District. The site was selected based on Honig's (2006) assertion that the uptake of education policy research is influenced by the contextual factors that shape what people can and will do. Two public day secondary schools were purposively selected for the study (Yin, 2017). Both schools operate on a double-shift system and are mixed-gender. They were chosen for their potential to provide "information-rich" data (Patton, 2015). Yin (2017) also emphasizes that findings from a two-site study can inspire greater confidence than those from a single-site study. The study adopted a social constructivist worldview, as outlined by Creswell (2017), which allows research to be grounded in participants' perspectives. A qualitative case study research approach was used for this study because of the values underlying qualitative research, which include the importance of people's subjective experiences and meaning-making processes and acquiring a depth of understanding from a small sample (Leavy, 2017). A case study design was adopted because according to Yin (2017), this type of research design aims at a comprehensive understanding of a case. For example, the case of the complexity of education policy implementation was explored in this study. There was no attempt to generalize, but rather to examine in depth the intrinsic uniqueness of this individual case for its own case. A total of 18 participants who were purposively selected to be studied in-depth (Ibid) were based on two features; institutional position and willingness or availability to be interviewed. A minimum of two school head teachers, two teachers per school (male and female) and a minimum of six students (male and female, including student leaders) were selected for the study, as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of Research Participants

SN	Research Participants	Number of participants
1.	Head Teachers	2 (1 Female, 1 Male)
2.	Teachers	4 (2 Female, 2 Male)
3.	Students	12 (6 Female, 6 Male)
	Total	18

Source: author

Data Collection

In order to gain in-depth understanding of the case under study, the revised NGES was firstly critically reviewed to help the author understand the policy document and prepare interview guidelines to explore its actual implementation. Semi-structured interview questions were used ensuring that participants used their own words to express their views, as emphasized by Yin (2017) and give the interviewer the flexibility to probe on certain issues with more open and follow up questions (Ruslin, Humaidi, & Taufiq, 2022). Although the questions were structured, they were not necessarily asked in a linear pathway. The order of the questions was largely dependent on when it appeared appropriate to ask them. To minimize disruption to participants' working time, at each school, the lead interviewer conducted a one-on-one interview with the head teacher, while the two other interviewers simultaneously conducted individual interviews with one teacher each. This method not only ensured efficient data

collection but also preserved the depth and richness of individual narratives by allowing for parallel, focused engagements (Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2013). At the end of the one-on-one interviews, all three interviewers led focus group interviews together comprising of six mixed-gender students in each school to allow for more comprehensive note-taking, better observation of non-verbal cues, and opportunities for inter-observer verification (Creswell & Poth, 2018). During the FGDs, the lead interviewer's role was to follow the interview guide, whereas the other two would be focused on taking notes, identifying 'unexpected' topics and asking curiosity questions where necessary, and recording responses. This approach to students' FGDs enabled probing and asking additional questions not explored by the lead interviewer (Monforte & Úbeda Colomer, 2021). It also provided space for the research participants to provide more details about initial responses and enabled a rich co-generation of data that would have been more difficult to achieve with one interviewer (Velardo & Elliott, 2021). Awkward silences were also managed (Durkin, George & Powell, 2020). To further crosscheck information provided from interviews (Ary, Jacobs, Sorensen, & Walker 2010), document analysis of school termly plans, meeting minutes, MoE reports, such as the 2020 NESIP and 2023 Education Sector Performance Report (ESPR) and any related reports available on the NGES to provide additional national and school-level context was conducted.

Data analysis

Data was analysed using both deductive and inductive thematic analysis approaches concurrently for a more comprehensive understanding of the data while remaining open to new, emerging patterns (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006), as shown in (Table 2). To establish trustworthiness, the study used member checking, providing thick descriptions of the context, keeping detailed field notes for triangulation and maintaining neutrality and reflexivity throughout the research process.

Ethical issues were considered in the study in order to protect the rights of the participants. Prior to the actual interviews, informed consent, including parental consent for minors, was sought and the purpose of the research was clarified to participants (Creswell, 2017). An official letter from the CWED was obtained for accessing participants and the aim of the study was explained Ary *et al.* (2010). The official letter was then presented to institutional head teachers. During the course of interviews, voluntary participation was upheld, privacy of participants was respected by not insisting that they give any information that they are reluctant to share. Each participant was coded using a number which does not carry any numerical value of their post in the school (Ibid). Participants were given the right to withdraw at any stage without penalty.

Table 2: Sample thematic data analysis matrix

Deductive codes and inductive codes <i>in italics</i>	HT1	HT2
Awareness <i>Has heard</i> <i>Has Seen</i> <i>Has read</i> <i>Not sure</i> <i>Other policies</i>	Yes <i>“To be frank with you, I have heard about it, but I haven’t gone through the contents because I don’t know where I can source it...”</i>	No <i>“No, I am not aware of that policy. The only policy that I know that promotes girls’ education is the Readmission policy...”</i>

Source: author

Findings

Policy Dimension of the NGES

Awareness about the NGES and Malawi MoE goal and targets towards girls' education.

Exploring the level of awareness of school stakeholders about the NGES was the first research question of this study. This included participants' awareness of the NGES as a policy, the goal of the Malawi MoE, the targets and roles of school stakeholders during implementation. According to the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology [MoEST], (2018), the goal of the MoE incorporated in the NGES document reads: "Increased number of girls equitably accessing, participating, excelling and completing primary, secondary and tertiary education".

The responses to the first research question on awareness of the NGES, the goal and targets from the 18 participants were almost similar and very general. 11 out of 18 participants reported that they were not familiar with many formal policies on girls' education. The study learnt that 15 out of 18 participants mentioned the Readmission policy. On further probing to understand their level of awareness of gender-responsive policies, in general, head teachers reported limited awareness of the revised Readmission Policy guidelines among teachers and students, beyond the general understanding that the policy permits girls to return to school after pregnancy. One head teacher noted that the MoE delayed in effectively disseminating the policy to school stakeholders and emphasized that its introduction lacked adequate consultation with school-level actors. Teachers echoed similar concerns; although they were generally aware of the policy and understood the required procedures when a girl becomes pregnant, they felt that more detailed guidance and training were needed. Almost all students, particularly girls, also indicated awareness of the policy but expressed uncertainty about its specific provisions. These findings reflect broader gaps in policy dissemination and stakeholder engagement, which hinder the effective implementation of gender-responsive policies. Similarly, the responses to whether they are aware of the NGES and the goal of Malawi MoE towards girls' education, all the participants gave a broad description. For example, one Head teacher explained, "*No, I am not aware of that policy. The only policy that I know that promotes girls' education is the Readmission policy. I have never seen the actual document here at school, but I am sure a lot of teachers know about it or have heard about it one way or the other because it deals with issues that are obvious and necessary if girls are to continue with their education* –(HT2). A teacher responded, "*Yes, I have somewhat heard about the NGES*".

A student said, "I have heard that the government wants to help girls stay in school, especially those who face challenges like early marriage or pregnancy. But I don't know much about how the strategy works or what it includes." –(S8)

As shown in Table 2, participants displayed varying levels of knowledge about the NGES. From the gathered information, 5 out of 18 participants said that they have heard about it but they have never seen or read it, while 11 participants said they have not heard, seen or read the NGES. The information provided indicated that the NGES guidelines were unclear among the participants and they were not sure if they are being implemented in their schools. They further reported that the policy document was not available in the schools and did not know if it was available at the division office. Some didn't even know where to get a copy of the document. They claimed that this meant they had nowhere to refer, in case they needed clarification about the strategies. One Head teacher, however, suggested that the policy document should be made available in the schools and online. "*To be frank with you, I have heard about it, but I haven't gone through the contents because I don't know where I can source it. I have also come to realise that many documents are missing in my office, maybe because people were taking them*

*as personal property. So, I just have to find one and go through it". – (HT1). Another teacher explained; "I am not sure, which one is this one? No one has ever explained it to us. You see, these policies are confusing, sometimes they all say the same things. The problem is that as teachers we were not involved in these policy issues so we don't take them seriously" – (T2). Reading the facial expressions of both teachers and students, some seemed just uncertain and expressed the view that it was their first time hearing about the NGES. This vagueness was expressed by their comments which included: "Not sure" "I don't know" and "Maybe". 10 out of the 18 participants, (both teachers and students) responded that they were not sure whether they knew anything or not. One Head teacher observed that the challenge was that they were not involved in the development of these education policies and not trained once the policy was enacted. The Head teacher's revelation is a manifestation of top-down mechanisms of command and control where main emphasis is on the ability of decision makers to produce unequivocal policy objectives and control their implementation (Sabatier & Mazmanian, 1979). 3 teachers claimed their lack of awareness was because of lack of information about the policy due to poor communication strategies. They also claimed that the implementation guidelines were poorly reinforced. While all but one student reported that they were not aware that the NGES document existed. On further probing, however, one teacher indicated that they had seen and read the first NGES on the internet while doing their own research for academic purposes. He demonstrated awareness of some of school-level stakeholders' expected implementation roles by mentioning two correctly, but further indicated the unavailability of the policy document in their school. One female student recounted having heard about the NGES on the radio and on Television. However, she had also not seen the policy document or read the strategies and pointed out that maybe it was poorly disseminated. She said: "*I heard on the radio and saw on the TV News about a policy document that promotes girls' education maybe two to three years ago but I am not aware of the strategies because I haven't seen or read it here at school. I don't think it is properly distributed in schools for us students to know it". – (S8).**

Table 3: The level of awareness about the revised NGES among Head teachers, teachers and students in Bwaila Cluster, Lilongwe

School Stakeholder	Heard about	Seen the NGES	Read the NGES	Not sure the NGES roles
HT1	✓	X	X	
HT2	X	X	X	✓
T1	X	X	X	✓
T2	X	X	X	✓
T3	✓	✓	✓	
T4	X	X	X	✓
S1	X	X	X	✓
S2	X	X	X	✓
S3	X	X	X	✓
S4	✓	X	X	
S5	X	X	X	✓
S6	X	X	X	✓
S7	X	X	X	
S8	X	X	X	
S9	X	X	X	
S10	✓	X	X	
S11	X	X	X	
S12	X	X	X	✓

Source: Author

(b). Awareness of school-level stakeholders' implementation roles in girls' education.

17 participants out of the 18 indicated that they had not read the NGES implementation roles on their own. One teacher, however, had come across the NGES during their own academic research in the year 2023 and knew some of the roles of schools. He mentioned, documenting

trends in girls' education at their school and collaborating with their community to keep girls in school. However, 10 out of the 18, including; 2 head teachers, 3 teachers and 5 students expressed the view that they knew the school's role in promoting girls' education while one teacher and 7 students were not sure. Interestingly, upon reading the school stakeholder roles from the NGES document to the participants, almost all participants said that they recognized the strategies and were familiar with them because they were similar to the activities they were already carrying out in both schools to promote girl-child education. One teacher explained; *"Aaaah, I know these things very well. These are activities that we are implementing at the school to promote the education of girls"* – (T2). The activities mentioned included, teacher motivation, professional development, activities to address school-related GBV issues such as school talks and encouraging girls to report any form of GBV in and outside the classroom, sexual and reproductive health talks, supporting needy students through students' welfare committees, support from well-wishers, and conducting study circles and after-school lessons to improve learning outcomes for learners. These incentives align with the priority areas of the NGES. In support of the current finding, Honig (2006) also explains that levers of change include small autonomous school initiatives. However, all these depend on supportive contextual conditions. All participants seemed to agree that knowing their roles could greatly impact their willingness to engage in implementation. They reported that they understood the significance of their involvement in the implementation of the NGES, but they needed guidance and support on what to do: *"The targets and our roles and responsibilities seem to be very important. We don't take issues of girl-child education lightly here but we need guidance"*. – (T4) explained.

Data on the implementation plan of the MoE drawn from a document analysis of the revised NGES and key MoE reports, including the 2023 ESPR and the NESIP (2020-2030), provided limited detail on the actual progress, challenges, and activities of stakeholders at the central and school levels. For instance, while the 2023 ESPR notes an increase in the number of girl learners supported through bursary schemes, rising from 12,000 in 2018 to over 18,000 in 2019, it does not link these outcomes directly to NGES targets or provide qualitative insights on the impact of such interventions (MoE, 2023b). Similarly, the NESIP 2020-2030 outlines broad goals such as reducing dropout rates among girls by enhancing gender-responsive infrastructure and menstrual hygiene management, yet lacks specific progress indicators or disaggregated reporting mechanisms that would allow tracking of NGES-aligned initiatives (MoE, 2020). These gaps made it difficult to assess how effectively NGES are being operationalized and monitored at various levels of the education system.

People Dimension of the NGES

Varying Perceptions about the NGES by school-level stakeholders.

From the collected information, the study found out that the NGES targets are being implemented unknowingly and viewed differently among the participants. When the priority areas were read out to all the participants from the NGES document, all head teachers, and 2 students referred to them as National Education Standards (NES), 8 students, as School-based activities, 1 teacher as Individual-teacher initiatives and another teacher referred to the, one-size fits all approach to girls' education policy implementation.

NGES as 'National Education Standards'

Upon reading the NGES targets and the roles to the head teachers in this study, both conveyed familiarity with them but expressed that they were the NES. Upon further exploratory one Head teacher elaborated as follows, *"Some of these things we just do them, we don't really know*

where they are coming from. As a Head teacher, I know these things because they are in our NES document. So, when implementing them we don't treat them as targets specifically in the NGES" – (HT1).

NGES as 'School-based activities

Gathered data also showed that the NGES were also referred to as 'school-based activities' among 2 teachers and 8 students in the current study. Information gathered from school Y further revealed that there are appropriate plans each term to carry out the activities and they perceived that these 'school-based activities' are being carried out successfully. An analysis of the school's documents, such as, school termly plans and school staff meeting minutes revealed that these activities included, mentorship, peer support groups, inviting role models including professional women and alumni, school talks on school-related GBV and engaging parents and community leaders to create a supportive community that can encourage girls to stay in school. However, both the head teacher of the school and teachers expressed the need for on-going support and collaboration with the MoE in making sure that these activities are being implemented effectively. Additionally, from the information gathered, it was discovered that these school-based activities were either rarely supported by the Malawi MoE or Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and well-wishers, such as alumni. However, after exploring further, it was revealed that this support is not enough. In particular, the head teacher of the school claimed that they had not received government funding for the past two years and there had not been proper monitoring of the schools' activities by the Malawi MoE. 3 out of 18 participants (one head teacher and 2 teachers) stated that they were not sure that they were on the right path since they did not have onsite technical support from the Malawi MoE. T4 shared her concern and said: *"For uniformity's sake, we need more on-site support and to have somewhere or something where we can refer to. How is the Ministry going to measure progress on girl child education promotion in schools if each school is doing their own thing?"* – (T4).

NGES as 'Individual-teacher initiatives

The study also found that the strategies were referred to as individual-teacher initiatives by one teacher and 2 students. The teacher at school Y reported that some of the activities that are done to promote girls' education are efforts of interested individual teachers, mostly, female teachers who usually play the "the motherly role" to the girls in the study schools. She explained, *"Most of the teachers support the girls and are interested in girl's education. They even go a step further and make the girls feel like they have second mothers."* – (T1)

'One size fits all approach' to NGES implementation

At School X, the findings also indicated a shift in focus, from planning girls' education activities exclusively for girls to incorporating both girls and boys in these efforts. One teacher expressed concern that boys are now being overlooked, as the emphasis seems to be primarily on girls. This perspective was echoed in school documents, including staff and cluster meeting minutes, indicating that the concern may be shared by multiple stakeholders. The teacher remarked, *"Generally, our approach to girls' education is one size fits all. Some of these things we just do because they are on the donors' agenda but maybe lack of funds is one challenge, we do not even have washrooms for girls at the school"* – (T2).

3.3. Place Dimension of the NGES

a) Unavailability of the NGES document in schools

Evidence from participants showed that the implementation of the policy was driven by common sense, trial and error, and individual interest. All 2 head teachers reported that the policy document was not available at their schools. Among the 4 teachers, only one was aware of the NGES and expressed the need for formal documents to be distributed in schools to improve stakeholders' knowledge. Some teachers suggested that the Malawi MoE could provide soft copies, considering the growing use of technology. Among 12 students, 9 believed that making the document available in schools would increase awareness and improve implementation. One student said, *"It has to be distributed in schools for our teachers to know their roles and guide us. It should also be in the school library so students can read it"* – (S1)

b) Inadequate resources and funding

The gathered information revealed that many participants expressed concerns about inadequate capacity to implement the NGES effectively. Both head teachers cited challenges such as lack of trained teacher counsellors and limited time due to the double-shift schedule of their schools. One head teacher highlighted that while their school planned girls' activities each term, only a few were implemented due to time and schedule constraints. Furthermore, all 4 teachers agreed that guidance and counselling committee members lacked formal training provided by the MoE. One teacher had only received brief, general training at a workshop sent by the school management to attend, while 3 had not received any at all. Despite this, they volunteered due to their passion for the field. Both teachers and head teachers emphasized the need to establish and strengthen school guidance and counselling training sessions for teachers by MoE. From the 12 students, many reported that school clubs were inactive due to lack of funding. One student remarked, *"We used to have a girls-guide club but now it is not as active as it used to be. Most of the time we plan activities and trips but we don't go because of inadequate funds. A lot of girls have become uninterested in joining clubs"* – (S10).

c) Lack of on-going support

Ongoing support was highlighted as crucial by both head teachers and teachers. They identified the need for training, site visits by MOE officials, and stronger collaboration with communities. One head teacher expressed that their school lacked support from the surrounding community, explaining: *"In the catchment area where we are, we do not have enough support from parents... It's just saddening to see some girls who are capable of doing better but they do not have much support from home"* – (HT1). A teacher echoed the same sentiment, recommending national prioritization of education, *"I feel as if, as teachers we are not supported enough... more site visits and policy evaluations by the Ministry are needed in order to assess progress of policy implementation."*

d) Lack of school and community sensitization about the NGES.

Despite the low level of awareness regarding the NGES, there was strong agreement on the need for enhanced policy sensitization. One head teacher (HT2), advocated for community involvement, stating, *"Every stakeholder must be sensitized... Sometimes the community does not take part because they also don't know."* 2 out of the 4 teachers emphasized the importance of policy awareness in schools and called for empowerment of school leadership to engage communities through Parent-Teacher-Associations (PTAs), Board of Governors (BOGs), and

local chiefs. Among 12 students, many observed that rural parents lacked information about NGES, which negatively impacted their interest in supporting girls' education.

Discussion

The current study reinforces existing literature on the persistent implementation gap in gender-responsive and broader education policies, particularly in low and middle-income countries, including those in Africa. Despite the formulation of progressive frameworks, translating policy into effective practice remains a challenge (UNESCO, 2018; Tao, 2018; Rattray *et al*, 2013; Fullan, 2015; Sykes *et al*, 2012). Similarly, findings from this study revealed a notably low level of awareness of the NGES among school stakeholders in the Bwaila Cluster. This gap can largely be attributed to several interlinked factors. First, there appears to be an absence of structured and systematic dissemination mechanisms for the NGES, resulting in inconsistent or incomplete communication of policy content at the school level. Second, limited capacity-building initiatives and training opportunities for teachers reduce their ability to internalize, adapt, and implement the strategy effectively. Third, the lack of consistent monitoring and follow-up support from national education authorities further weakens implementation commitment. A key finding of this study is the dominance of a top-down implementation model, whereby decisions regarding the NGES are made at higher policy levels with minimal consultation of school stakeholders, such as, head teachers, teachers, and students. For instance, the disregard of school stakeholder insights in the development of the NGES priority areas. This approach not only impedes ownership of the policy among implementers but also undermines the contextual adaptation and willingness necessary for effective change (Honig, 2006; Malen, 2006). The findings highlight the need for a more iterative and dialogic approach to policy development and implementation, in which collaboration with school stakeholders and feedback loops are actively encouraged (Datnow, 2020; Coburn, 2005). This study challenges traditional models of policy implementation and advocates for a flexible, multi-perspective approach that actively involves school-level actors in all phases of the policy cycle, from planning and dissemination to implementation and evaluation. Such an approach would not only enhance the legitimacy and relevance of policies like the NGES but also increase the likelihood of sustainable and impactful outcomes in girls' education in Malawi. The study further aligns with earlier work (e.g., McLaughlin, 1987; Spillane *et al*, 2002; Honig, 2006; Muthanna & Sang, 2023) that highlights the lack of clarity of policy objectives and roles and information about the policy, which often leads to misinterpretation, uncertainty, and inconsistent practices, making implementation prone to failure. In this study, while there was general consensus among head teachers, teachers, and students about the importance of gender-responsive policies in education, different understandings of the NGES and the expected roles of school-level stakeholders were evident. These varying perceptions were largely attributed to a lack of information about the NGES and their roles in implementation, inadequate communication between the MoE and schools and lack of orientation about the policy. For example, school stakeholders demonstrated confusion to differentiate the NGES targets and the NES because they claimed they are similar. One can, therefore, contend that this conflation appears to stem from overlapping thematic areas, such as inclusive education, safe learning environments, and quality teaching, which are central to both policies. The result is a blurred understanding of the targets and roles and responsibilities, potentially leading to misapplication of the guidelines during implementation. McLaughlin (1987) emphasized that policy actors may implement or interpret a policy differently not necessarily due to resistance, but because they do not fully understand or identify with its intentions. In this context, top-down theorists like Matland (1995) argue that reducing vagueness in policy objectives through clearer, more directive policies enhances implementation commitment. However, this study supports a more synthesized approach, acknowledging that lack of information about policy and clarity in

policy targets and roles is not merely a flaw but a reflection of the inherent complexity of educational systems (Honig, 2006).

Additionally, the notion of ambiguity in policy due to poor communication and dissemination also manifested in this study. This was evident in teachers and students engaging in gender-sensitive practices without knowing they align with the NGES. The study findings revealed that there were various school activities undertaken in one of the schools to promote girls' education which are consistent with the targets and roles outlined in the revised NGES policy document. These activities include, teacher motivation, professional development, interventions to address school-related gender-based violence (GBV), support for vulnerable students, particularly girls, and initiatives aimed at improving learning outcomes for girls. These findings are in line with other studies in Malawi, such as, Gondwe (2020), who characterizes such school-based interventions as '*informal policy and practices*', noting that these practices can sometimes supplement or even substitute for formal policy mechanisms. This observation aligns with education implementation researchers who advocate for synthesized models of education policy implementation. For example, Spillane *et al.*, (2002) argue that successful implementation depends not only on the content of the policy but also on how local actors interpret and respond to it within their specific contexts. Similarly, Honig (2006) emphasizes on small autonomous school initiatives which, however, if not managed properly can frustrate educational improvement goals. Reflecting on these findings, it is reasonable to conclude that greater emphasis should be placed on supporting and empowering school-level stakeholders to make context-specific decisions in advancing girls' education. Empowered school leaders, in particular, could be more motivated to adopt and institutionalize the NGES, establishing a supportive school-wide framework that enables teachers to effectively implement the strategy. This could lead to a more sustained and contextually relevant application of the NGES, ultimately fostering greater responsiveness and positive educational outcomes for girls. In addition, complexity-informed policy research (e.g., Signé, 2017; Taylor, 2021), further posits that adaptive strategies, such as, ongoing professional development, inclusive consultation with stakeholders and timely evaluation, are more effective in policy implementation than rigid adherence to fixed policy scripts (Suggett, 2011). This study further aligns with education researchers who argue that, when properly managed, ambiguity can present opportunities. It can promote localized innovation, foster ownership, and support learning (Spillane *et al.*, 2002).

Furthermore, one of the activities outlined in the revised NGES is the MoE's commitment to intensify awareness of inclusive policies and related frameworks to stakeholders at all levels (MoEST, 2018). However, the findings of the current study reflect earlier research on gender-responsive policy implementation in Malawian schools (e.g., Fawe, 2020; CSEC, 2014; Samati, 2013) which reveals that the absence of the policy document at the school level also contributes to widespread misconceptions. These include the belief that gender-related interventions benefit only girls at the expense of boys, or that they are donor-driven. These types of misconceptions are not unique to Malawi. Studies from other contexts similarly show that when school-level stakeholders lack access to the full text of education policies or receive inadequate orientation, they often rely on hearsay or assumptions, which can distort the intended aims of the policy (Unterhalter, 2019; Morley *et al.*, 2010). For example, Unterhalter (2019) notes that in some Sub-Saharan African contexts, gender policies are misinterpreted as "favouritism" toward girls, leading to resistance among some educators and parents. This underscores the importance of clear and effective dissemination strategies. Research shows that transparent communication and stakeholder involvement enhance the legitimacy, acceptance, and sustainability of education policies (Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2011; Viennet & Pont, 2017). Making policies physically and digitally accessible, conducting regular orientation

workshops, and facilitating participatory interpretation processes are all critical steps to mitigate misconceptions and foster shared ownership of education reforms. Furthermore, this study's findings regarding funding and resources align with existing literature identifying insufficient resource allocation as a persistent barrier to effective policy implementation (Signé, 2017; UNESCO, 2021; Kafumbu, 2020). Stakeholders at the school level often perceive the provision of funds as the exclusive responsibility of central authorities, particularly, the MoE. Studies above have shown that without consistent and adequate investment, even well-intentioned policies such as the NGES are unlikely to translate into practical, measurable outcomes. Hanushek & Woessmann (2021) argue that financing education yields long-term economic benefits by strengthening human capital. Consequently, resource constraints at the local level not only hamper policy implementation but also undermine broader development goals, particularly those related to gender equality and inclusive education.

Conclusion

The study employed Honig's three-dimensional approach to explore the level of awareness and perceptions of school stakeholders regarding the revised NGES in Bwaila Cluster, Lilongwe to determine its implementation. The findings revealed a misalignment among the policy itself (NGES), the perceptions of school stakeholders (the people), and the implementation environment (the place). A lack of information and clarity regarding NGES targets and roles largely due to poor communication and dissemination, has contributed to a low level of awareness among school stakeholders. Perceptions of school stakeholders about the NGEs and their roles in implementing the NGES varied considerably. Overall, there was a negative perception of how the strategy is being implemented in Bwaila Cluster. The study found that stakeholders viewed the NGES in different ways: as the NES, as school-based activities, and some as individual teacher initiatives while others referred to the one-size fits all approach to its implementation. Interestingly, other school stakeholders were found to be implementing aspects of the NGES without realizing it. This aligns with other studies that describe such actions as "informal policy practices." Additionally, institutional challenges identified included the unavailability of the NGES policy document in schools, limited funding and resources, lack of ongoing support, and insufficient sensitization efforts within schools and communities.

While the findings demonstrated a clear willingness within the schools in the study to promote girls' education, it also highlighted the need for tangible collaboration and support, not merely in policy documents, but in practice. Improved engagement with school stakeholders, including their communities is especially crucial. For instance, one school in the study reported difficulties in involving parents in their children's education due to the school's location, which is near a peri-urban area, where community engagement is particularly challenging. The findings underscore the importance of stakeholder involvement at all levels, especially at the school level, where these key stakeholders are often excluded from the policy development process. There is a pressing need to sensitize all stakeholders about the NGES to ensure the policy is well recognised and accessible both in schools and online to support effective implementation. In addition, the MoE should consider conducting regular professional development programs for head teachers and teachers. These should include updates on policy changes and training in areas such as guidance and counselling, along with the provision of relevant materials. This would help educators embrace new ideas, enhance understanding, and contribute to positive change in the education sector. Furthermore, since school-level stakeholders tend to interpret and implement national policies in ways that suit their contexts, school stakeholders should be empowered to act based on their understanding of such policies.

This approach could improve the application of the NGES and support the broader goal of achieving equitable access to education.

Ongoing support from MoE is also critical. This may include onsite and offsite workshops focusing on NGES components, as well as information dissemination via local radio, television, digital or national conferences. Regular monitoring and follow-up mechanisms are essential to ensure consistency and alignment across schools. Given potential financial constraints, MoE could consider partnerships with NGOs and other actors already engaged in gender-responsive initiatives in various districts. Additionally, parents should be encouraged to provide both moral and financial support to help their daughters complete their education.

A limitation of this study is that it did not include community voices, such as those of parents, in the interviews. However, both head teachers and teachers noted a general lack of parental interest in girls' education. Despite this limitation, the use of probing during interviews allowed the researcher to collect substantial insights from participants. In addition, the limited engagement with actors at the central levels, such as the National Coordinator, the Technical Committee, District and Educational Zone Officers, is acknowledged as a limitation. Future research should address this gap to provide a more comprehensive understanding of NGES implementation.

In conclusion, the study illustrates how the interaction between policy, people, and place affects the success or failure of implementation. Alignment among these three dimensions facilitates smoother execution, while misalignment creates barriers and varying perceptions. The findings contribute to the growing body of knowledge on gender-responsive policy implementation and highlight the need for further research into informal institutional practices and how they impact on policy outcomes in education.

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