

The public employer as an architect of gender and class inequalities in Malawi's teaching career

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Article info

Received: August 2025
Revised: November 2025
Accepted: December 2025
Published online: 31 May
2026

Keywords: Inequality,
employment regime, public
teaching, gender, class,
Malawi

Abstract

This article examines how the public employer reinforces gender and class inequalities within Malawi's teaching profession. Drawing on qualitative data from 53 respondents, including teachers and human resource managers, the study finds that although government policies aim to widen access to teacher training, their impact is limited. Constraints include the absence of a coherent, well-funded social policy linking training to recruitment, and changing entry requirements that disproportionately disadvantage women and individuals from low-income households. Additionally, monopsonistic employer power and the quota system have failed to produce equitable outcomes. As a result, gender and class inequalities persist, highlighting the continued discriminatory nature of access to teacher training and teaching careers in Malawi.

Introduction

Considering the critical role that the public sector employment regime plays in extending employment rights to all workers, the article investigates how the public teaching employment context produces and reproduces workplace inequalities using Acker's (2006b) theoretical framework of inequality regimes, while being intersectionally sensitive. Adopting an "intersectionally-sensitive" (McBride, 2015 et al, 2015: 335) approach to studying inequalities is key to revealing the persistence of disparities that may affect men and women differently. Rodriguez et al. (2016) observed that the extant literature on intersectionality as applied in work and organisational research remains nascent, requiring further studies to expand this literature base. Recent studies have examined religion-gendered intersectionality, whilst recommending that future studies take into account other differentiating factors (See Ramadan, 2022). Ramadan's (2022) study also focused on Muslim women academics from South and Southeast Asia and the Arab world, working in UK universities.

The paper focuses on recruitment, selection, and promotion as key organisational processes shaping gender and class inequalities in teaching among Malawians working in their home country. It is structured as follows: an overview of Malawi's gender equality policy context, the theoretical framework, the public sector employment regime, methods, findings, discussion, and conclusions.

The gender equality policy context in Malawi

Malawi's political context is that of a democracy with commitments to gender equality, despite sluggish progress (Amundsen and Kayuni 2016). Since the 1993 transition to multiparty democracy, Malawi has incorporated international and regional gender equality commitments into domestic law (Semu, 2002), notably through its constitution, which guarantees gender equality and prohibits discrimination (GOM, 1994). Gender equality is further supported by the National Gender Policy (revised in 2015 and 2025), the Malawi 2063 development agenda, and a national gender machinery led by the Ministry of Gender, Children, Disability, and Social Welfare, alongside a women's parliamentary caucus Archenti and Johnson (2006).

Nevertheless, women continue to be underrepresented in employment and politics in Malawi. The major outstanding achievement on the gender equality front during the democratic period has been a strengthened discussion of women's participation in public life, including employment (Amundsen and Kayuni 2016). Over the years since democracy, commitment to gender equality at the political level, despite being low at the beginning, has gradually grown. This has led to important efforts to overcome women's disadvantaged position in Malawi, as evidenced by their poor educational performance, which is key to their participation in formal employment. Malawian women have been trailing men across all levels of education. In 2011, 65 percent of the population aged 15 years and above was literate, but this included 74.4 percent of men compared to 57.2 percent of women (GOM, 2012a).

The poor performance of women in education needs to be understood within the cultural context in which girls' education takes place. Sankhulani's (2007) study revealed that Malawian girls do more household chores than boys due to their parents' traditional preferential treatment of boys, and that boys refuse to do household chores, because they believe it is the responsibility of women and girls. Some girls go to school late because they have to undertake household chores first. They may also be engaged in household activities after school, leaving them with limited time to study. Others would even be absent from school because parents require them to do specific tasks during school hours, or because of inadequate sanitation facilities in schools (Kadewere 2015). As a result, their school performance is affected. Consequently, only 45 percent of girls reach higher secondary school, compared with 53 percent of boys (Williams 2012). Also, only 40 percent of those who passed their Malawi School Certificate of Education¹ (MSCE) in 2015² were girls.

Additionally, only about 33 percent³ of those who sat for the University of Malawi Entrance Exams in 2014 were female. To improve women's participation in education, various policies have been developed. These relate to banning of child brides, reducing costs of educating girls, and the "50:50" gender selection policy.

Malawi has a history of child brides, and in 2013, it was ranked in the top 20 countries with the highest rate of child marriages (Nyasa Times Reporter 2013). In 2014, at least 46.3 percent of women aged 20-24 married before age 18, compared to only 6.4 percent of men in the same age category (GOM., 2015a). Thus, while laws and the constitution prohibit child marriage, the practice is still common in Malawi (Population Institute 2015). Child marriage occurs more frequently among girls who are the least educated, poorest, and living in rural areas (GOM., 2015a).

In 2015, Malawi enacted legislation to operationalise the constitutional ban on child marriage by setting 18 as the minimum legal age for marriage without parental consent (GOM, 1994; GOM, 2015b). Prior to this, girls aged 15-18 could marry with parental consent, contributing to persistently high rates of early marriage: in 2014, at least one in ten women had married before age 15, and by 2018, nearly half of Malawian girls were married before

¹ Malawi School Certificate of Education is an award to students who pass the national exams written at the end of four years of secondary education

² Own computation based on MANEB MSCE results

³ Own computation based on UNIMA list

18 (GOM, 2018). While the law presents progress, child marriage remains closely linked to poverty, affecting nearly half the population (GOM, 2020).

To address gender disparities in education, Malawi introduced policies to reduce the cost of schooling for girls. The Girls' Attainment in Basic Literacy and Education (GABLE) programme in the early 1990s exempted girls from primary school fees (Chimombo et al., 2000). This was followed by the Free Primary Education (FPE) policy in 1994, which abolished fees and uniforms for all children, leading to a nearly 50 percent increase in enrolment (Kadzamira and Rose, 2001; Swainson et al., 1998). Despite improved access, girls remain vulnerable to household economic pressures and domestic responsibilities, contributing to higher dropout rates in the final year of primary school (Stromquist, 1989; GOM, 2014b).

To counter longstanding gender imbalances in secondary and tertiary education, Malawi adopted the 50:50 selection policy in 2009 to ensure equal access for women and men in public institutions (Msukwa and Msukwa, 2013). Although contested on meritocratic grounds, the policy sought to redress entrenched gender disadvantage, underscoring the need to assess progress toward achieving gender equality in education.

Inequality regimes: An intersectionally sensitive approach

Organisations typically employ women and men in different roles and hierarchical positions, and even in female-dominated sectors, power often remains concentrated in men's hands. Such organisations are considered gendered because human resource processes continually reproduce gender inequalities (Acker, 1990; 2006a). While gendered organisational theory has been widely used to examine workplace inequalities (e.g., Bezbaruah, 2015), its binary focus risks obscuring differences among women and other intersecting forms of disadvantage (Carr and Thompson, 2014; Hankivsky, 2014). Consequently, scholars advocate an "intersectionally sensitive" approach that recognises multiple, interacting sources of inequality (McBride et al., 2015:333).

Acker's (2006b) concept of inequality regimes provides a useful intersectional framework, defining organisational inequality as systematic disparities in power, resources, rewards, and opportunities, produced through everyday practices along gender, class, and racial lines. By adopting this framework, the study examines how recruitment, selection, and promotion in Malawi's teaching profession generate unequal outcomes across social groups, avoiding single-axis analyses that overlook intra-group differences (Acker, 2012; McBride et al., 2015). In doing so, the study contributes to the limited literature on intersectional employment inequalities in public sector contexts in developing countries. Recruitment processes are also central to inequality, with formal and informal recruitment sources having differing implications for access and exclusion (Kirman et al., 1989; Werbel and Landau, 1996).

Public sector employment regime in Malawi

With only 11.3% of employment in the formal sector, competition for public jobs in Malawi is fierce; despite formal recruitment rules, hiring can be shaped by ties to senior officials and politicians (Anders 2002a; Anders 2002b; Dzimbiri 2016). Teaching has been male-dominated—over 70% in secondary and ~60% in primary between 2000 and 2013, although female shares rose (secondary: 20.5% to 27.4%; primary: 36.5% to 40.2%) (Kelleher 2011; GOM 2008). To boost women's entry, the government planned a 35% expansion of the teacher supply with a pro-female bias and introduced Open Distance Learning (ODL) in 2009; ODL was later abandoned for lack of funding (GOM 2008; World Bank 2010).

Since 2009/10, university admissions combined district quotas and merit—initial places go to the top five male and five female candidates per district, with remaining slots by merit and district population—an attempt to redress regional imbalances (Chijere Chirwa 2014; University Office 2014). The 50:50 selection policy and subsidised primary teacher training (later requiring a 20% trainee contribution from 2015/16), together with bursaries and loans, have widened access for low-income students and women (Msukwa & Msukwa 2013; Nyasa Times Reporter 2015).

Training completion typically led to assured public employment without an interview, helping raise female representation in the public sector (public: 65.3% male, 34.7% female; private: 80.8% male, 19.2% female) and offering relatively stable, better-paid work (Adsera 2004; GOM 2010). As the public sector accounts for 72.8% of education jobs, teaching remains a key route to formal employment—especially for rural and low-income women who face barriers to other careers (GOM 2010).

Methodology

Study design

The study adopted a qualitative multiple-case study design for an in-depth examination of complex social processes and institutional arrangements and is particularly appropriate for addressing “how” and “why” questions related to career trajectories, workplace conditions and gendered experiences within specific organisational contexts (Yin, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The case study approach also facilitates analytic comparison across contexts, enabling theoretical rather than statistical generalization (Lewis et al, 2014).

Sector and site selection

The education sector was purposively selected because it is a key public-sector employer in Malawi and employs a large proportion of educated women (Chitsulo, 2017; GOM, 2010a). Education is also a strategic sector for national development and gender equality, with explicit policy commitments such as the 50:50 gender recruitment target. Studying this sector, therefore, offers strong policy relevance and the potential to generate findings applicable to broader public-sector employment dynamics.

Within the education sector, two divisions were purposively selected: The Shire Highlands Education Division (SHED) and the Central West Education Division (CWED). These divisions were chosen to allow a rural–urban comparison of women’s career experiences. SHED is predominantly rural, while CWED is largely urban. This contrast was analytically important, as existing literature suggests that locality influences access to resources, working conditions, promotion opportunities, and work–family balance, all of which are central to understanding gendered career outcomes (Unterhalter et al., 2014). Selecting the two divisions, therefore, enabled the study to capture contextual variation within the same sector while maintaining institutional comparability.

Selection of schools and respondents

Following the selection of the two divisions, stratified purposive sampling was used to identify districts, schools, and individual respondents (Patton, 2015). Within SHED, Chiradzulu District was selected, and one primary school and two secondary schools were included to capture variation across school level and location (rural and semi-urban). Within CWED, Lilongwe City and Lilongwe Rural East were selected, with one secondary school (urban) and one primary school (rural) purposively chosen to ensure comparability with SHED.

Within each sampled school, teachers were purposively selected based on predefined criteria: gender, age, marital status, presence of dependent children, length of service, and hierarchical position. These criteria were used to ensure diversity of experiences and to capture how career trajectories intersect with family responsibilities and institutional arrangements. While the primary focus was on women teachers, a small number of male teachers were included to provide comparative insights into gendered career dynamics.

Key informant identification and justification

Key informants were identified through purposive sampling based on their institutional roles and relevance to teacher recruitment, deployment, promotion, and professional development (Kumar, 2019). In the education sector, these included officials from the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST) headquarters, the Teaching Service Commission (TSC), and the Department of Teacher Education and Development (DTED), as well as education division and district-level human resource officers.

These stakeholders were selected because they are directly involved in policy formulation, implementation, and oversight of human resource management in education. Including them enabled triangulation between teachers' lived experiences and the formal institutional frameworks governing careers, thereby strengthening the credibility and analytical depth of the study (Denzin, 2012).

Rationale for sampling approach

The use of purposive and stratified purposive sampling was appropriate because the study sought information-rich cases rather than statistical representativeness. This approach allowed the researcher to capture variation across rural and urban settings, school levels, and institutional roles, while ensuring that respondents had direct experience relevant to the research questions (Patton, 2015). The resulting sample supports robust cross-case analysis and enhances the study's theoretical and policy relevance.

Table 1 shows the number of people who participated in semi-structured interviews to collect data for the study. ⁴

Table 1: Study Respondents.

Industry	Organisation/Division	Number of men	Number of women	KI	Total
Education	Shire Highlands	5	10	2	17
	Central West	3	15	2	20
	Upgrading student teachers	7 ⁵	6		13
	DTED			1	1
	Teachers' service commission			1	1
	Ministry headquarters			1	1
Total		15	31	7	53

Findings

This section first presents findings on how recruitment and selection are conducted in teaching in Malawi, drawing out their implications for workplace inequalities and the persistence of gender- and class-based inequalities. Secondly, it discusses government equality policies and their effect on gender and class-based inequalities.

Recruitment and selection process in teaching in Malawi

Recruitment for teachers is centralised and occurs at entry to teacher training rather than when vacancies arise, with available bed space in training colleges being the main constraint. A multi-departmental team shortlists candidates who sit for aptitude tests in numerical, communication, and reasoning skills; candidates are ranked by score and selected using a district quota system. A mandated 50:50 gender policy is implemented by first selecting the top five males and top five females per district, then filling the remaining district slots by score, separately for each gender.

Secondary school teachers are recruited for training through three routes: upgrading qualified primary school teachers to a diploma, training school leavers at diploma level, and training school leavers at degree level. Diploma

⁴ The University of Manchester's ethics and clearance committee approved and cleared this research.

⁵ Interview recording of one respondent in this group could not be traced in my digital recorder. As such, only 6 interviews from this category of respondents are included in the analysis.

selection follows the primary teacher model, using open adverts, aptitude tests, district quotas, and a 50:50 gender policy. Since 2015/16, degree candidates at the University of Malawi have been selected based on MSCE scores, quotas,⁶ and the 50:50 policy. At both levels, candidates must have six credits, including English; however, higher subject-score requirements—especially in the sciences—limit girls’ ability to meet the 50 percent gender target.

The recruitment and selection process used in teaching is advantageous for equality in several ways. Firstly, openly advertising training vacancies ensures that a wider audience is reached, which may yield a larger pool of potential candidates from whom the best are selected (Newell 2005). Formal recruitment methods have also been theoretically linked to greater transparency (Egbert et al., 2009). Therefore, using them in teaching in Malawi promotes equal opportunities. Secondly, clear stipulation of entry requirements in the open adverts encourages merit-based recruitment. People from different backgrounds can apply, provided they meet the criteria (Bezbaruah 2015), thereby providing a level playing field for all potential applicants.

However, women find it challenging to join teaching due to failure to meet the MSCE requirements. For instance, the 2015 recruitment of primary school student teachers under the IPTE 11 revealed gender differences in ability to meet the training requirements. As Table 2 below shows, the number of females shortlisted and selected has decreased significantly in the 2017 (IPTE13) selection, following the introduction of the higher MSCE requirement (see Table 3). Although the selection still aims to achieve 50:50 representation, a reduction in the number of those meeting the criteria means this cannot be achieved, as the 2017 selection for primary teacher training shows. This is an issue of inequality as this shows that such “equal treatment laws do not tackle the deep-rooted causes of inequality” (Walby, 2004, p.6).

Table 2: Changes in MSCE requirements since 2015/16 Academic year

Academic year	MSCE requirements
Before 2015/16	MSCE with 1 credit ⁷ in English, 1 pass in Mathematics and 1 pass in any science subject
2015/16	MSCE with 4 credits including English and one science subject
2016/17	MSCE with 6 credits which should include English, Mathematics and one other Science subject plus an aggregate of 30 points ⁸ .
2017/18	MSCE with 6 credits which should include English, Mathematics and any other science subject plus an aggregate of 36 points ⁹ .

This finding is also consistent with Mambo et al. (2016), who noted that despite affirmative action measures aimed at increasing female enrolment in higher education, significant gender disparities persist. For instance, female enrolment in 2011 accounted for 46.2 percent of the total in private institutions and 34.9 percent in public universities. Although the number of women meeting the minimum requirements for joining teaching has always trailed those of men, the change in requirements in 2016/17 (Table 3) has widened the gender gap further, resulting in fewer women entering primary teaching in 2017.

⁶ The quota system was abolished in 2020.

⁷ There are nine possible scores per subject at MSCE ranging from 1 point (highest) to nine points (lowest). Points 1 to 2 are considered distinctions, 3 to 6 credits, 7 8 pass and 9 is a fail.

⁸ IPTE12 advert posted on 25th June on the Domasi College of Education facebook page which I accessed on 5th July, 2016).

⁹ IPTE13 summary of advert posted on 9th July on the Malawi National Examination Board Facebook page which I accessed on 21 December, 2017.

Considering the different challenges that girls face, with those from higher socioeconomic status households more likely to go to good schools than their counterparts in lower socioeconomic status households, it is more likely that girls in the latter category will find it even harder to meet these requirements, resulting in inequalities understood from the intersection of gender and class. Additionally, Table 3 shows that in 2015, more men than women had more career alternatives, as almost half (46.4 percent) of the male applicants shortlisted did not appear for the aptitude test, compared to only 0.8 percent of the female applicants.

Table 3: Candidates for primary school teacher training in 2015 and 2017

	Males	%	Females	%	Total
2015 intake (based on the 2015/2016 criteria)					
Total Applicants	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	20,000
Shortlisted for aptitude tests	11,097	70.8	4580	29.2	15,677
Those who wrote the aptitude test	5944	56.7	4542	43.3	10486
Those selected	1669	52.4	1517	47.6 ¹⁰	3186
2017 intake (based on the 2017/2018 criteria)					
Total Applicants	7533	59.1	5245	41.0	12,778
Shortlisted for aptitude test	4137	75.7	1325	24.3	5462
Those who wrote the aptitude test	2954	75.1	987	25.0	3941
Those selected	1944	66.4	983	33.6	2927

Changes in MSCE requirements worsen class inequalities by disadvantaging rural students, especially girls, who struggle to compete for limited tertiary training places, including teaching (Kadzamira, 2003; Mlangeni & Chiotha, 2015). Rural Community Day Secondary Schools (CDSSs) lack proper facilities and qualified teachers, resulting in high failure rates (Mlangeni & Chiotha, 2015). Long travel distances increase absenteeism among girls, and some may engage in sexual activities to support themselves financially while away from home (Chisamba, 2016). This, in turn, affects their performance in examinations. Emily, a manager responsible for teacher education, confirmed the adverse effect of the revised MSCE requirement on females and candidates from rural schools:

... We have noted that most females do not qualify to become teachers... due to the revised selection criteria... [Additionally]... if we look at the conditions in CDSSs, there are no laboratories, which means... sciences are not taught as seriously as in conventional secondary schools. So, most students coming out of the CDSSs may not do very well in science, thereby depriving them of the chance to qualify for teacher training...

This finding is consistent with Mambo et al. (2016: p.xv), who argued that in Malawi, at least 91.3 percent of students pursuing higher education come from the “richest quintile (20 percent) of households, while the poorest quintile of households account for just 0.7 percent of higher education enrolment.”

¹⁰ Women selected are less than 50 percent, despite more women writing the aptitude tests. This can be attributed to data entry errors or to female candidates scoring so low that it was not possible to offer them a space, which resulted in male candidates getting women’s space.

Government's equality policies and their effect on gender and class-based inequalities

The Malawi government has demonstrated a commitment to reducing inequalities in public teaching careers through its recruitment and selection processes. Both male and female teachers engaged in the second phase¹¹ of the interviews highlighted that the teaching profession allowed them to pursue a career that ensured job security amid limited options, even if it was not one they had intended. From these interviews, some teachers (11 out of 25) highlighted not having chosen to pursue teaching but recognised that it offered them an opportunity to get into formal employment. This was the case for 7 out of 14 male teachers and 4 out of 11 female teachers, who echoed the following views:

... I cannot say [that] I chose teaching ..., it was a matter of having a higher degree after failing [to go to the University of Malawi] (Promise, 33-year-old, Secondary school teacher, Single, 10 years of service, Lilongwe).

I have to be frank with you, it's because there are no jobs. So, when I was joining teaching, I said to myself, Aaah! I will just [do this] to get experience and later on move out. I am a linguist by profession, and I would have loved to work as a linguist. Still, I have never had a chance" (Mateyu, 29 years old, Secondary school teacher with a non-teaching qualification, 6 years of service, married, Lilongwe).

... I didn't choose teaching ... in Malawi, jobs are hard to find (Gracious, 27-year-old Primary school teacher, 3 years of service, single, Lilongwe).

This lack of choice in formal-sector jobs for men and women reveals the obstacles to creating opportunities, especially for women, through the 50:50 policy for teaching, in a context where there is an overall lack of professional jobs for men. Men end up taking a large share of teaching jobs, despite it being feminised in other countries (Kelleher 2011). In 2013, only 4 percent of employed people were in managerial, professional, technical, and associated professional occupations (GOM. 2014). Thus, teaching offers job security to both men and women in a context of limited formal-sector job opportunities. Emily, a manager responsible for teacher education, summarised the benefits of the teaching career:

If you compare the courses offered in Malawi, teaching is cheaper. Before [2015], it was free. So [all] candidates [including] those from low economic status families... would opt for [it] ... and entry into the civil service is somehow automatic, they don't have to be interviewed¹² again..... Once they finish the course, they join the public sector as teachers ...

Additionally, teaching affords women opportunities for work-life balance, due to shorter school days, especially for those teaching in infant classes in primary schools, as one respondent affirmed: "Last year, I was teaching in standard three and finished at 13:15. Now, I am teaching in standard one, and we finish around 10 am. (Martha, 26 years old, primary school teacher, Chiradzulu)." However, the government's efforts to ensure that people from different backgrounds access teacher training are constrained by various factors, as discussed next.

Lack of a coherent social policy due to insecure budgetary support

Following the 2013 donor aid freeze (Chinsinga 2014, Dionne 2014) and intermittent donor support, Malawi implemented a variety of austerity programs. These developments are concerning in the context of gender and class-based inequities that operate both independently and intersectionally. In 2015/16, primary teacher training included a 20% payment by students toward the actual cost of training to achieve cost-sharing. Prior to 2015/16,

¹¹ In the first phase of the interviews, this question was not asked but came as an issue to consider after the initial analysis of data collected plus the need to include men in the sample.

¹² Interviews are yet to start for primary school teachers although these have started for secondary school teachers

not only was the training free, but the government also provided scholarships to some students to study at diploma and degree-granting colleges based on merit. This ensured that people experiencing poverty who could not afford other expensive courses could still access tertiary education through subsidised teacher training and the opportunity for a scholarship (GOM. 2012).

Both subsidies have now ended, and although the fees in Teacher Training Colleges are lower (about US\$49/per term), students from low socio-economic status households were reported in 2016 to be dropping out of these institutions due to failure to pay the fees or obtain bursaries or loans, which were promised when the fees were introduced. This also applied to public institutions offering secondary school teacher education. Although the number selected is no longer based solely on bed space, but on classroom space, in public universities, students from poor backgrounds also face challenges meeting upkeep and tuition fee expenses, which are now higher. By the time of this research, due to limited funding, not everyone who applied for a loan/bursary received one, and in 2015/16, only about half of the applicants received their loans¹³ (Pembamoyo 9 April, 2016, Makina 9 May 2016).

This may lead to further widening of the gap between the minority rich and the majority poor, (Chisamba 3 June, 2015). Similarly, adequately funded teaching jobs are limited to accommodate all the newly qualified teachers despite teacher shortages in Malawi, evidenced by high pupil-teacher ratios and training targets (GOM 2008, GoM. 2015). The teaching workforce has been growing at just one percent per year, which is inadequate to reduce the average pupil/teacher ratio measured at 76:1 in 2011 to the local target of 60:1 ratio by 2017, let alone to the ideal global target of 40:1 at the primary school level (GOM. 2008, UNESCO 2014). Unavailability of funding for jobs has resulted in primary school teachers who completed training in 2013 (IPTE 8) and in 2014 (ODL cohort 3) remaining unemployed for close to three and two years respectively (GoM. 2015). Another group, which completed training in 2015 under IPTE 9 and ODL cohort 4, only got posted to teaching schools in mid-2017 (MalawiPost 2017). IPTE cohort 10 and ODL cohort 5 teachers who finished their studies in 2016 were not yet employed by early 2018.

Furthermore, secondary school teachers who qualified in 2015 remained unemployed as of December 2017 (Malawi Post 2017). Also, due to limited job openings at the secondary school level, in 2017, the government began advertising job opportunities (MalawiPost 2017) and interviewing candidates before they are posted to a school. This is done to focus on subject-specific teachers, namely, those in sciences and languages. This will mean that those trained to teach the humanities will find it challenging to secure teaching jobs, even after completing their training. As women are overrepresented among these, this austerity focus on decreasing public sector employment may have an adverse effect on women.

Similarly, although recruitment for training under IPTE continues, the ODL mode was abandoned in the 2015/2016 academic calendar amid financial difficulties. This occurred despite the ongoing teacher shortage, especially in rural areas, that necessitated the introduction of the ODL programme in the first place. In fact, the advert for the latest cohorts states explicitly the programme's conditions, one of which is to "teach in rural primary schools"¹⁴. Although the ODL has been abandoned, there is not adequate funding in teacher training institutions to increase intake, let alone train at full capacity, as currently the "ministry only enrolls [at] 60 percent of the bed capacity" (Emily, manager responsible for teacher education). Limited bed spaces mean fewer people admitted for training, thereby reducing opportunities and consequently restricting access to the occupation, especially for women and those from poor households. Therefore, although the government is making efforts to create opportunities for women, as long as these efforts are not supported by a supportive social policy framework, there may be limited meaningful impact in reducing inequalities in teaching.

¹³ 4,166 out of 8,226 (Malawi University of Science and Technology Facebook page posted on November, 12, 2015)

¹⁴ An extract from IPTE12 advert posted on the Facebook page for Domasi College of Education on 25th June 2016 but accessed on 7th July 2016

Change in MSCE requirement and quota system

Due to limited infrastructure and reduced social spending on teacher training, coupled with increased demand for training, the MSCE requirement for student teachers was raised. This change is also contributing to gender inequalities by disadvantaging women, whose performance at MSCE always trails that of men. There is also a significant reduction in the proportion of women passing the MSCE between 2014 (46.9 percent) and 2015 (39.9 percent).

Moreover, Malawi's higher education system remains limited compared with those of other SADC countries, constraining its ability to accommodate more men and women (World Bank, 2010; Mambo et al., 2016), resulting in stiff competition among applicants. As such, tertiary education remains a privilege available to only a few Malawians.

Monopsonistic employer power and its effects

The findings also suggest that the government has monopsonistic power as an employer. Since almost 99% of trained teachers were employed by the government in 2012/13 (GOM, 2014), the Malawi government is a typical monopsony employer in the teaching sector. Monopsonistic employer power manifests in four ways: low pay, delays in paying teachers, restrictions on teachers engaging in small businesses, and making it difficult for teachers to change to a non-teaching job within the civil service.

To begin with, the findings suggest that primary school teachers in Malawi receive lower pay than other civil servants who do not depend solely on basic income. The teachers argued that although their basic pay was the same as, and in some instances higher than, that of other civil servants at a similar grade, a teacher's total income is low and does not meet the demands of the job. This is because other civil servants were reported to have additional sources of pay, including allowances for fieldwork, external travel, and workshops. Although this additional income varies from one month to another, the other civil servants, for the most part, do not have to depend solely on their monthly salary, unlike teachers. Patrick, a 29-year-old male secondary school teacher, explained the difference: "I can give you an example of a friend who was here [as a secondary school teacher] but is now at the [Education] division. He told me he is averaging K300,000¹⁵ a month."

This tends to disadvantage, especially those just entering the profession, who "earn less than one-third of teachers in the highest pay category" (UNESCO 2014, p.29). According to UNESCO (2014) a teacher who is the primary breadwinner and has at least four family members to support, needs to earn at least US\$10 per day to keep the family above the US\$2 per person poverty line. In Malawi, the lowest-paid primary school teacher earns a gross monthly salary of MK74,309.00 (US\$4 per day before PAYE and approximately US\$ 3 per day after PAYE). An urban basic needs basket computed by the Centre for Social Concern showed that a family of six in Malawi needed around K120 000.00 (US\$168) per month as of March 2015 (Chauwa, 2015). This means that the lowest-paid primary school teachers have a shortfall of almost half of what's required to meet basic needs. Most of the teachers echoed Lexa's view: "If you are joining teaching, you are signing a ticket to living below the poverty line. Always queuing in the loan facilities and the loan sharks" (Lexa, a 30-year-old, single female secondary school teacher).

This finding is consistent with Kadzamira's (2006) work, which argues that teachers in Malawi are underpaid and that this is the main factor affecting their motivation and morale. The finding also concurs with (UNESCO 2014), which argued that teachers in some countries, including Malawi, do not receive enough pay to prevent their households from falling into poverty and that those entering the profession, as well as those teachers with no promotion opportunities in Malawi, "barely have enough to live on" (p.256). The already low pay continues to fall due to high inflation, with the daily pay for the lowest-paid primary school teachers remaining at an equivalent of US\$4 since 2007/2008 (UNESCO 2014). Table 6 shows pay in teaching as of 2015.

¹⁵ This is almost three times the gross salary of a Diploma holder secondary school teacher as presented in Table 6.4 below

Table 5: Entry-level pay in teaching

Entry level	Entry Gross pay (MK)/month	Entry pay ¹⁶ (US\$ equivalent/month)
Primary school teacher (Certificate- Grade L)	74,309	105.43
Secondary school teacher (Diploma- Grade J)	113,859	161.5
Secondary school teacher (BA degree)(Grade I)	177,980	252.5

Source: Chilabade (2015). US\$ dollar equivalent is as at 5th July, 2016, accessed from the Reserve Bank of Malawi's website

Teachers in Malawi often experience delayed salaries, receiving pay as late as the 11th of the following month instead of the 27th (Nyasa Times Reporter, 2012). Official reasons include large payroll management, removing fake workers, and decentralisation reforms, while unofficially, financial problems allow the government to delay pay without major repercussions. Newly hired teachers may wait 3–6 months for their first salary, and arrears take a long time to settle (Muwake, Kalekeni et al., 2016).

This tends to entrench class-based inequalities, as only those with better-off relatives can be supported by their families during periods when they are not receiving pay. Those without relatives to help out turn to *katapila* (loan sharks), who charge exorbitant interest rates. Coupled with low income, once they start receiving income, they continue to rely on *katapila* to cope with the country's high cost of living (Chauwa 17 March, 2015). Legal money lending institutions, such as banks, typically impose prohibitive conditions on their loans that teachers cannot easily meet. Lastly, the government has also made it difficult for teachers to change jobs within the civil service, even after retraining or acquiring the necessary skills for non-teaching roles.

Discussion

The findings have significant theoretical contributions. Firstly, although class and gender have received considerable attention in research, much of it focuses on the individual effects of these characteristics rather than their intersection. Class remains a relatively understudied characteristic, and studies examining its impact alongside other characteristics are limited, if not absent (Berry, 2012). At the same time, although gender-based inequalities may be considered unacceptable, class-based inequalities are still widely accepted as reasonable, often seen as the negative consequences of “meritocratic practices” (Berry, 2012, p. 244) used in recruitment and promotion. Basing human resource management decisions on merit is not problematic in itself, but the way merit is determined in many cases is exclusionary. This is due to a lack of a level playing field that allows all people, regardless of ability, to meet the merit-based recruitment and promotion requirements. As Rubery et al. (1999, p. 74) noted in the European context, more “reliance on fair structures and systems to determine recruitment and promotion” should be the focus of the equality agenda rather than just on performance and the individual.

Secondly, where the merit criteria for promotion are not transparent, or are deliberately structured to exclude some groups, or where recruitment and selection methods are applied inconsistently, the most likely result is discrimination. The identified class-based inequalities also intersect with gender to shape inequalities, with more women from low socio-economic status households being less able to acquire the relevant qualifications to enable them to join the studied industries. Taking an intersectionally sensitive approach to analysing inequalities in the studied industries enabled an understanding of how different groups of men and women were affected by various practices that contribute to inequalities across employment contexts. If an intersectionally sensitive approach had not been adopted, differences among men or among women themselves would not have been considered, thereby ignoring the possibility of important disparities within these groups (Hankivsky, 2014).

¹⁶ As at 27th November, 2015

The last contribution relates to the use of Acker's inequality-regimes framework to understand inequalities in the public sector. The framework, among other things, identifies organising processes that produce inequalities. In its original focus, Acker's theory concerns organisational contexts exemplified by private-sector organisations, in which the organisation itself shapes processes and practices. In public sector, policies and practices are shaped by the state, which has multiple objectives. Additionally, the industry's management is driven by state budgets or state-based systems of administrative or bureaucratic procedures rather than the organisation's specific practices, which are controlled directly at the organisational level, the focus of Acker's framework. In this case, public sector equality policies are affected by budget deficits, which therefore reduce the opportunities, especially for women and those from low socio-economic status groups, to join teaching. Although Healy et al. (2011) applied Acker's framework to explain why inequalities persist even in public sector organisations that are supposed to promote equality, this has mostly been in the context of decentralised public sector entities. This study applied Acker's inequality regime framework to a highly centralised and bureaucratic public sector context.

The study has also made relevant contributions to public policy. It has recently been acknowledged that most sector plans in Malawi lack clarity on strategies to address gender disparities (GOM, 2012). The findings of this study may thus inform policies and strategies to reduce gender inequalities arising from the way recruitment, selection, and promotion are conducted in the public service. The study has shown that requirements for entering primary teaching have become stricter due to more people passing their MSCE and limited infrastructure to accommodate the increasing demand for training. By reflecting on the role of the austerity state in contributing to class and gender inequalities, the study has highlighted the importance of government as an equal-opportunities employer, such that any budgetary constraints it faces have detrimental effects on the equality agenda. The study suggests the need to intensify efforts to increase training resources to meet demand and to prioritise providing funded jobs at different levels of teaching. This policy would not only reduce gender and class-based inequalities but also address the teacher shortages.

Conclusion

This paper examines how the teaching context generates workplace inequalities, highlighting five key factors. One major factor is the intersection of social class and gender in career entry. While open advertising and subsidised training allow access for diverse candidates, policies alone cannot overcome underlying barriers (Kerr and West 2010) such as poor MSCE performance among girls from low-income households, which limits their chances of entering teaching.

At the same time, the inability to access loans or bursaries is also making it difficult for those from poor households to pursue a teaching career. Additionally, budgetary constraints that limit the availability of funded jobs are also contributing to both gender and class inequalities. Furthermore, there is the exploitation of monopsony employer power through low wages or even salary delays. This indicates that, despite opportunities for entry into teaching, teachers are not treated as professionals after completing their training. This therefore indicates that Malawi has a long way to go in ensuring equal access to education, and education and training continue to be discriminatory.

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