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# Gender and Education for All: Progress and problems in achieving gender equity

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### ABSTRACT

The paper explores the effects of rapid increases in gender parity in primary schooling in Bangladesh and Malawi on gender inequities in schools and communities. Based on an analysis of comparative case studies of marginalized communities, we argue that educational initiatives focused on achieving gender parity provide limited evidence that girls' educational experiences modeled significantly different gender norms than in communities, or that by being educated, girls experienced a transformation of the inequitable gender relations they faced in society. The data illustrate persistent gender discrimination related to educational attainment and learning, and gender-based violence in schools. These patterns of gendered discrimination and violence largely mirrored those that girls and boys experienced in their homes and communities, raising important questions about the transformational capacity of current gender parity and schooling models.

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## 1. Introduction

In the wake of the 1990 World Conference on Education for All (WCEFA), and particularly over the past decade, there has been a significant international effort to provide access to quality primary education for every child throughout the world (Mundy, 2006). Initially, out-of-school children consisted disproportionately of girls in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, and international declarations concerning Education for All (EFA) focused on getting girls in these regions into school in equal numbers to boys. International declarations and many EFA initiatives adopted a liberal feminist approach to gender equality in which gender was equated with girls and equality was associated with parity (Aikman and Unterhalter, 2005). The declarations continue to focus on achieving gender parity in enrollment,<sup>3</sup> while increasingly also emphasizing the importance of a quality Education for All. For example, the Dakar Framework For Action (UNESCO, 2000), states

as a goal: “eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005, and achieving gender equality in education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring girls' full and equal access to and achievement in basic education of good quality” (p. 8). The Millennium Development Goals (2000) also focus on increasing access to primary school (Goal 2) and eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary schooling (Goal 3).

International efforts to get all children into primary schools have yielded a significant decrease in percentage of out-of-school children, and in particular a decrease in the global gender gap in out-of-school children; nevertheless, more than 50% of out-of-school children are still girls (Unterhalter, 2010). A few countries, including Bangladesh and Malawi, have been particularly successful at decreasing, and even reversing, the enrollment gender gap that historically favored boys. Despite these laudable successes, we argue in this paper that gender inequities and girls' and women's secondary status in both countries persist in similar forms in and out of school, belying the expected equity and empowerment outcomes that the international development discourse posits will occur as a result of enrollment gender parity. Our studies in these countries raise important questions about the linkages assumed in international declarations between gender parity and gender equity and empowerment, and point to two particular issues—gender discrimination and violence—that may affect girls, women, and their schooling experiences and outcomes across a broad range of communities.

We draw a distinction between the successes of a liberal feminist agenda, one oriented to equal access and rights to existing

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<sup>3</sup> For example, UNESCO's “Global Partnership for Girls' and Women's Education” focuses on gender parity in upper primary and lower secondary school. C.f., at the time of writing, UNESCO was planning a Forum on Gender Equality in Education titled “Looking Beyond Parity.”

models of formal, government-sponsored schooling, and a critical feminist agenda that aims to foster equity and the well-being of girls and women, boys and men in their educational experience and its linkage with other social spheres (Aikman and Unterhalter, 2005).

Parity and equity (each of which is commonly, and confusingly, referred to as “equality” in different literatures) are concepts that reflect different models of fairness and justice. Parity is a zero-sum game, in which success is measured in terms of uniform distribution of a uniform good (for example, access to school, or a fifth-grade education) across groups. There is only one point at which parity is reached—when distribution is the same across all groups. Parity lends itself to measurement and data collection because of the uniformity of goods, recipients, and measurements across groups. Parity models generally assume that existing rights and institutions simply need to be equally distributed to all. If men have the right to vote, women should have the same right to vote. If boys have access to a particular type of school, girls should have access to the same. Gender parity in schooling was, for centuries, an issue of getting girls and women into existing schools; in a growing number of countries around the world, as enrollment or retention rates have flipped, it is now an issue of getting boys in.

While parity may certainly be one aspect of more equitable social and educational relations, equity as a concept allows for differentiation of distribution, recipients, goods, systems, and outcomes in service to greater fairness or justice. For example, girls and boys might both benefit from a different model of schooling than currently exists, girls might need different or greater resources than boys to attend schools in equal numbers because of historic inequalities in access and current inequalities in divisions of labor, girls and boys might face different obstacles—and therefore require different kinds of support—in attending school, and so forth. As a concept, equity is less unified in its units of measurement and therefore may have multiple, sometimes conflicting, and often less easily counted measures of success. By destabilizing the assumption that the same input or outcome has the same, positive effect on different groups, equity captures the critical feminist concern that girls and boys be understood in relation to the complex social, political, and economic systems of which they are a part.

Critical feminists call attention to understanding and improving educational processes and outcomes that foster equity in schools and in women and men’s lives outside of schooling. For example, they are concerned with examining the relationships among school practices, discrimination in reproductive rights and labor markets, and gender-based violence while fostering empowerment in social, political, educational, and economic spheres (Aikman and Unterhalter, 2005; Stromquist, 2002, 2006; Stromquist and Fischman, 2009; Subrahmanian, 2005; Vavrus, 2003). Decades of gender scholarship from a critical feminist perspective has brought attention to many of these issues, but these perspectives have not pervasively influenced the education agendas of NGOs and international agreements. As Unterhalter (2007) succinctly argues in her book, *Gender, Schooling and Global Social Justice*, the aspirations to eliminate gender discrimination and promote equity and justice for all were associated with the EFA movement and the Millennium Summit, but the indicators that were articulated and the focus of much subsequent work “entailed minimal remedies for girls’ access [rather than] maximal strategies for a wider meaning of gender equality [here, equity]” (p. 15). Subsequent research, for example Lewis’ and Lockheed’s (2007) work, while attending to the intersections of sex, ethnicity and poverty, has continued to emphasize factors that positively or negatively affect parity in enrollment and achievement, and to largely equate parity with equality.

More recently, scholars such as Bajaj (2008), Dejaeghere and Lee (2011), Murphy-Graham (2009), Shah (2011), and Maslak’s (2008) edited volume utilize a critical feminist perspective to examine the possibilities and limitations of fostering gender equity through schooling initiatives. This body of scholarship draws attention to gendered processes of learning in schools, how these gender processes can be “undone” (e.g., Stromquist and Fischman, 2009), and whether and how equitable gender relations can be enacted in social spheres in and outside of formal schools. Similarly, scholars working on gender equity and the MDGs are drawing attention to the political, social, and economic systems that constrain the growth of women’s “opportunities” even as progress toward gender parity in health and education measures increases (Buvinic et al., 2008; Grown et al., 2005).

This paper, working from a critical feminist approach, interrogates the assumption that liberal feminist measures of well-being (parity) appropriately measure and reflect gender equity and social justice in schools and society. It does so by examining gendered transformations in access to schooling in Bangladesh and Malawi in relation to the equitable well-being of women and men in the rural communities in which research took place.

To illustrate the gap between achievements in gender parity and fostering gender equity, this paper examines gender relations in schools and broader society in Bangladesh and Malawi. The analysis draws on data collected in 2008 and 2009 as part of a cross-national action research project that aimed to improve the lives of marginalized girls and boys.<sup>4</sup> The research took place in rural communities in Bangladesh and Malawi in which an international non-governmental organization (NGO) planned to introduce evidence-based interventions to improve girls’ education. The research process was conducted as a partnership between university researchers and the NGO staff, and included the development and use of cross-country structured and semi-structured interview, focus group, and school and classroom observation items. Data collection is described in greater detail below. This paper explores the outcomes of the first round of data collection conducted for the project, which revealed that both countries’ successful national education initiatives to achieve gender parity often maintained a gender inequitable status-quo, did not address systemic discrimination or violence, and at times may even have been detrimental to equality and empowerment outcomes in the schools included in the study.

### 1.1. Gender and education in Bangladesh and Malawi

Despite differences in the education histories, systems, and learning experiences in Bangladesh and Malawi, both countries are internationally recognized as success stories in achieving gender parity in primary schooling.<sup>5</sup> Below, we briefly describe selected historical aspects and trends in each country’s education system, their responses to EFA, and their successes at achieving gender parity in primary schooling.

### 1.2. Bangladesh and Malawi in comparison

Table 1 illustrates shared features of the trajectories of primary schooling and of gender and education issues in Bangladesh and Malawi. Both education systems have grown extremely rapidly over the past two decades, thanks to intense government efforts

<sup>4</sup> The studies were part of an initiative by a US-based NGO with country offices in Bangladesh and Malawi. Two of the authors are researchers who were employed in the Malawi and Bangladesh country offices at the time of the research and two are external research partners.

<sup>5</sup> For example, see the World Bank’s Millennium Development Goals web site (<http://www.worldbank.org/mdgs/gender.html>).

**Table 1**  
Comparative education data, Bangladesh and Malawi<sup>e</sup>.

	Bangladesh		Malawi	
	Female	Male	Female	Male
Total primary school age population, 2006 <sup>a</sup>	5,319,000	5,580,000	1,220,000	1,241,000
Primary school enrollment ratio, 1986–1993 <sup>b</sup>	64	74	47	50
Primary school enrollment, gross 2003–2008 <sup>c</sup>	105	101	119	114
Primary school enrollment, net 2003–2008 <sup>c</sup>	91	87	93	88
Primary school attendance, net 2003–2008 <sup>c</sup>	84	79	87	86
Primary school completion, 2004/2005 <sup>d</sup>	74.2	69.7	55.5	56.8
Secondary school enrollment, gross, 2003–2008 <sup>c</sup>	45	43	26	31
Secondary school attendance, 2003–2008 <sup>c</sup>	41	36	13	13
Year in which free primary education was introduced	1990		1994	
Estimated teacher:pupil ratio, 2008 <sup>e</sup>	1:44		1:93	
Estimated percentage of female teachers, 2004/2001	34.2 <sup>d</sup>		38 <sup>f</sup>	
Est. public expenditure per primary pupil as % of GDP/capita, 2003 <sup>d</sup>	7.6		13.5	
Total public expenditure as % of GDP, 2003 <sup>d</sup>	2.5		5.8	
Total public expenditure as % of total government expenditure, 1999 <sup>d</sup>	14.2		24.6	

<sup>a</sup> Data from United Nations Population Division, *World Population Prospects: The 2006 Revision*, March 2007.

<sup>b</sup> Data from UNICEF's *State of the World's Children*, 1996.

<sup>c</sup> Data from UNICEF national statistics, 2010.

<sup>d</sup> Data from UNESCO Institute for Statistics, Data Center, <http://stats.uis.unesco.org/unesco/ReportFolders/ReportFolders.aspx>, January 2008.

<sup>e</sup> Data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.PRM.ENRL.TC.ZS>.

<sup>f</sup> Data from the Commonwealth Organization, [www.thecommonwealth.org/.../%7B021F7F40-6529-4A90-A007-DF2B121C89BF%7D\\_Rergional%20Percentage%20female.pdf](http://www.thecommonwealth.org/.../%7B021F7F40-6529-4A90-A007-DF2B121C89BF%7D_Rergional%20Percentage%20female.pdf).

and to community, national, and international support for these efforts. EFA frameworks and strategies have played important rhetorical, organizational, and financial roles in these efforts. For example, Malawi adopted a universal free primary education policy in 1994 and Bangladesh adopted a free primary education policy in 1990—a core component of the EFA policy framework. International organizations provided significant funding for this effort in part because of their agreement to support EFA. Though both countries have successfully met part of the Millennium Development Goal 5, gender parity, through their adoption of EFA frameworks, neither is likely to achieve the goal of universal primary enrollment and completion and reports indicate poor quality of education has been a tradeoff to expansion of access.

Bangladesh has one of the largest primary education systems in the world, with an estimated 18 million primary school-aged children.<sup>6</sup> The Government of Bangladesh has made significant progress in increasing primary-school-age enrollment rates since adopting a policy of compulsory free primary education (FPE) in 1990. The gender gap in primary enrollment rates was closed in part by the success of non-formal primary education (NFPE) programs run by local NGOs, such as the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), and in part by government education policies targeted at girls and poor families, particularly in rural areas (Al-Samarrai, 2009; Schuler, 2007). Between 1985 and 2001, national enrollment rates doubled, as did the number of primary schools (Wils et al., 2005).

Similarly, Malawi saw a sharp increase in enrollment rates since 1994, when FPE was introduced by the newly-elected multiparty democratic government as a public commitment to democracy and EFA; the number of enrolled primary school students nearly doubled in the six months following the FPE declaration. Subsequent initiatives were undertaken by the Ministry of Education, international development organizations (IDOs), and NGOs to support FPE and girls' education, and total enrollment rose by more than 130% from 1990 to 2008 (Macro, 2008).

The phenomenal growth in the primary school-going population in both countries has been coupled with persistent quality concerns. Increased enrollment and decreased quality are often discussed as tradeoffs in poor countries like Bangladesh and

Malawi because government capacity to expand education budgets is seldom as large as school population growth. Educational quality has most often been measured through indicators such as teacher:pupil and textbook:pupil ratios or drop-out rates, and these have generally shown downward trends following enrollment growth. For example in Bangladesh the drop-out rate for primary grades was 33% in 2002, 47% in 2005, and 52% in 2006 (DPE, 2009). Both the Bangladesh and Malawian systems continue to experience relatively low rates of achievement as measured on national examinations. There are also marked and continuing inequities between rural and urban, wealthier and less wealthy, students and communities (Kadzamira and Rose, 2003).

Despite concerns about quality,<sup>7</sup> both countries have seen a considerable increase in the proportion and number of girls who enter the system, in part because education programs in each country have specifically targeted girls and provided girls with additional education resources, particularly at the secondary school level. For example, in Malawi, girls' enrollment rates exploded following the implementation of FPE and ongoing, large-scale, and successful girls' education programs supported by organizations such as the Ministry of Education, USAID, and Danida (Anzar et al., 2004; Macro, 2008). The gender enrollment gap decreased from 0.84 to 0.98 between 1990 and 2000 in response to such initiatives (Kendall, 2006). As a result, in many classrooms and schools in Malawi there are now more girls than boys, and there are signs that within a few short years, boys will be at a disadvantage in primary school completion rates and secondary school enrollment rates. Similarly, in Bangladesh, from 2005 to 2007, Unicef (2010a,b,c) reported average primary net enrollment rates of 87% for boys and 91% for girls (see Table 1).

By many measures of gender parity, these two countries' efforts have been remarkably successful at shifting girls from the minority to majority position in a very short period of time. As Table 1 illustrates, both countries now report that more girls than boys enroll in primary school, and boys are beginning to drop out of

<sup>7</sup> As may be noted by the common indicators of quality listed above, IDOs and governments have generally conceptualized school quality in gender-neutral terms. It has been commonly assumed, however, that although the measures of quality are not related to gender, if educational quality is improved, the outcomes for girls are expected to be more positive than for boys because parental and student tolerance for low-quality education is believed to be higher for boys.

<sup>6</sup> These numbers reflect estimates based on children aged 6–10 years only (Unicef, n.d.).

primary school at faster rates than girls. In Bangladesh, more girls than boys begin and attend secondary school; in Malawi attendance rates are equal and it is estimated that in the next five years there will be more female than male secondary school enrollees.

The rhetoric deployed by many international and state actors suggests that these successes in increasing educational enrollment and parity in the 1990s should have resulted in broad changes in women's health and well-being, financial independence, political participation, and social status and roles in both countries (e.g. Population Reference Bureau, 2011; Tembon and Fort, 2008; Herz and Sperling, 2003; Malhotra et al., 2003). Instead, persistent gender inequities within the schools in which research was conducted and across the education sectors parallel and in some cases condense those found in society. As Oxfam (2006) notes, Bangladesh still has a long way to go to achieve gender equity and equal roles for women and girls in society. Freedom from violence and protection of women's physical well-being is extremely low, and women continue to be discriminated against in their economic rights of inheritance and land ownership. Similarly, in Malawi, institutions and practices as diverse as customary law, national ownership rights, civil liberties, and social norms concerning physical violence continue to disproportionately favor men (OECD, 2009). Table 2 provides a brief comparison of data on gender indicators in each country.

Broad gender inequities in school and society are evident in most aspects of men's and women's daily interactions and in social, economic, political, and cultural practices. For example, in studies of gender-based violence in Bangladesh, half to two-thirds of women report having experienced domestic violence at some point in their lives (Bates et al., 2004). In 2000, nearly 80% of Bangladeshi adolescent girls and young women were estimated to be married before the age of 19, and 57% gave birth before the age of 19 (World Health Organization, n.d.). In Malawi, women face similar disadvantages in relation to their physical integrity; one-third of women 15–49 years-old reported having experienced violence (primarily perpetrated by husbands), and wife-beating is widely culturally accepted (Chakwana, 2005). Women have relatively little control over sexual interactions or reproductive decision-making, and they face a nearly one in seven lifetime chance of dying in childbirth (Unicef, 2010a,b,c). Young women are

more than four times more likely than young men to be HIV-positive (USAID, 2010), reflecting patterns of older men having sex with younger women, and younger women's comparative lack of control over sexual decision-making in such relationships.

Social inequities and gendered expectations affect other aspects of women's lives, including unremunerated work and labor force participation. Around the world, girls and women work longer hours than boys and men, but more often without remuneration (Landrine and Klonoff, 2002; International Labour Organisation, 1999). Carework—caring for children, caring for parents, caring for spouses or relatives—is unremunerated and heavily feminized in both countries. In contrast, formal paid labor opportunities and access to agricultural markets, particularly in rural areas, remain largely masculinized. For example, only 6% of women, compared to 22% of men, reported engaging in formal wage labor in a national survey in Malawi (Mathiassen et al., 2007).

Discrimination against women is also seen in inheritance of property and fundamental rights. In Bangladesh, while changes have occurred in laws to provide rights of movement, marriage, and divorce, marriage laws still grant the husband options of dowry and polygamy, and women's right to property is not equal to that of men (Zaman, 1999). Most rural women in Bangladesh are landless, as very few own property under their own name. Under the laws of inheritance, men always inherit more than women. In Malawi, studies have similarly documented the inequities that women face in land inheritance practices in patrilineal and national law systems alike (Chiweza, 2005; Ngwira, 2008; Peters and Kambewa, 2007). Additionally, socio-cultural norms continue to privilege men over women in access to a range of resources and daily social interactive patterns (Minton and Knottnerus, 2005).

In short, in both countries, great strides have been made toward educational parity, to the extent that boys will soon be underrepresented at the primary and secondary levels. The relative ease with which both countries were able to convince parents, girls, and communities to send girls to primary school does not appear, however, to reflect a deeper and sustained transformation in gender relations or norms or social or economic opportunities for adolescent and adult women. In some cases, it may even have made individual girls' and women's lives more precarious. Schuler (2007), for example, shows how gender norms about education for girls and women in Bangladesh are changing, yet these changes

**Table 2**  
Sex disaggregated indicators in literacy, labor and health, Bangladesh and Malawi.

		Bangladesh		Malawi	
		Female	Male	Female	Male
Labor force participation rate (% of population ages 15–64) <sup>a</sup>	2008	61.4%	85.5%	75.2%	77.7%
	2004	59.4%	86.9%	74.6%	78.8%
Employment by sector: agriculture <sup>a</sup>	2004	68.1%	41.8%	NA	NA
Employment by sector: industry <sup>a</sup>	2004	12.5%	15.1%	NA	NA
Employment by sector: services <sup>a</sup>	2004	11.7%	14.5%	NA	NA
Fertility rates: total (births per woman) <sup>b</sup>	2008	2.3	NA	5.5	NA
	2004	2.6	NA	5.9	NA
Fertility rates: adolescent (births per 1000 women ages 15–19) <sup>b</sup>	2008	70.5	NA	133	NA
	2004	87.6	NA	151.8	NA
Prevalence of HIV (% ages 15–24)	2007	NA	NA	8.4% <sup>c</sup>	2.4% <sup>d</sup>
Prevalence of HIV total (% of population ages 15–49)		0.1% (2005) <sup>e</sup>		11.9% (2007) <sup>f</sup>	
Literacy rate, adult total (% of people ages 15 and above)	2008	49.8% <sup>g</sup>	60.0% <sup>g</sup>	65.8% <sup>h</sup>	80.2% <sup>h</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Data from The World Bank, <http://go.worldbank.org/4PIIORQMS0>.

<sup>b</sup> Data from The World Bank, <http://go.worldbank.org/UJ0Q1KQKX0>.

<sup>c</sup> Data from The World Bank, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.HIV.1524.FE.ZS>.

<sup>d</sup> Data from The World Bank, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.HIV.1524.MA.ZS>.

<sup>e</sup> Data from UNESCO Institute for Statistics, [http://stats.uis.unesco.org/unesco/TableViewer/document.aspx?ReportId=136&IF\\_Language=eng&BR\\_Topic=0](http://stats.uis.unesco.org/unesco/TableViewer/document.aspx?ReportId=136&IF_Language=eng&BR_Topic=0).

<sup>f</sup> 11.9% HIV total—data from The World Bank, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.DYN.AIDS.ZS>.

<sup>g</sup> Data from UNESCO Institute for Statistics, [http://stats.uis.unesco.org/unesco/TableViewer/document.aspx?ReportId=124&IF\\_Language=eng&BR\\_Country=500&BR\\_Region=40535](http://stats.uis.unesco.org/unesco/TableViewer/document.aspx?ReportId=124&IF_Language=eng&BR_Country=500&BR_Region=40535).

<sup>h</sup> Data from UNESCO Institute for Statistics, [http://stats.uis.unesco.org/unesco/TableViewer/document.aspx?ReportId=124&IF\\_Language=eng&BR\\_Country=4540&BR\\_Region=40540](http://stats.uis.unesco.org/unesco/TableViewer/document.aspx?ReportId=124&IF_Language=eng&BR_Country=4540&BR_Region=40540).

have at times resulted in increased physical and psychological costs to female students, have raised concerns by parents and girls that they may not get married or may have to pay larger dowries (Amin and Huq, 2008), and conflict with the lack of economic and employment opportunities for educated women.

## 2. Conceptual framework

Given the liberal feminist approach undergirding the international discourse on gender equality in education, it is not surprising that most national and international gender and education outcomes are measured in terms of parity in primary school enrollment, retention, and completion rates for boys and girls. The research described in this paper included the collection of data on these measures, but moved beyond them to collect data that support a multifaceted understanding of gender equity and education.<sup>8</sup> The research was based on a matrix of broader dimensions of gender equity and social justice including: school and learning attainment, quality of educational program/processes, equality of educational opportunity, and empowerment in and through education.

The framework moves beyond the common indicators of parity in enrollment, completion and achievement to capture social processes and gender-related social changes that begin to explain why gender inequities exist and how they can be addressed (Rao and Kelleher, 2005; Subrahmanian, 2007). For example, attainment measures include two indicators typically cited for gender parity: completion and retention, as well as data related to achievement. As Aikman and Unterhalter (2005) have argued, discerning the effects of achievement on gender equity requires identifying how children's participation and learning in school translates into meaningful use of knowledge and skills in their lives. The measures therefore go beyond common indicators (such as enrollment and attendance data) to try to understand children's perceptions of the value and application of school-based skills and knowledge in their lives. Such measures link attainment to equality, empowerment, and equity in and outside of the school.

The gender equality dimension drew on extensive research about gendered relations and practices in education. This research has found that gendered norms and beliefs about learning and education held by teachers, girls, boys, and parents affect both girls and boys negatively by shaping expectations and creating stereotypes that reinforce inequitable treatment, even when girls' performance is on par with boys'. For example, parental attitudes and encouragement to learn math is related to gendered opportunity structures for future learning and work, not individual performance (Baker and Jones, 1993). Schleicher (2007), in an international assessment of achievement, found that boys held more positive attitudes than girls toward learning math, but there were comparatively small differences between girls' and boys' actual math performance. Attitudes and influences of teachers also perpetuate gender differences (Wiseman et al., 2009). These studies suggest that in much of the world, parents, teachers, girls and boys hold different attitudes about girls' and boys' learning ability and opportunities to use that learning, which may, in turn, affect their participation in and outcomes from schooling. In this study, we assumed quality and equality to be intricately related. Drawing on feminist scholars' contributions of linking gender to these dimensions in other frameworks, we conceptualized gender relations in schools and teachers' gendered practices as integral features of the quality of the physical and social environment, content and pedagogy. This contrasts with many international frameworks, such as UNESCO's (2004) international quality standards and with Unicef's (2001) Quality of Education frame-

work, which do not explicitly link quality with gender relations and norms in schools.

The dimensions of empowerment draw on an abundant set of studies on empowerment among women, girls and boys. Much of the literature on empowerment refers to women and girls' agency, aspirations, actions and decision-making about their own lives (Kabeer, 1999; Maslak, 2008). It also considers the material and resource structures that affect women and girls' freedom to act and make decisions (Kabeer, 1999). These structures are not only material goods and institutions, but also discourses and norms within school and in the broader society (Kabeer, 1999; Maslak, 2008). Norms and practices of harassment and violence, work, and discipline perpetuate gender inequities (Maslak, 2008). Material structures, such as toilets and sanitation facilities, as well as access to sufficient food and health care, matter for access to education and for learning while in school and subsequent wellbeing. Finally, collective agency and supportive relations are considered another important dimension of empowerment for women and girls (Moser, 1993; Sen and Grown, 1988). In particular, teacher and peer relations play an important role in empowering or disempowering girls (Kirk and Winthrop, 2007; Martinez Bordon, 2003). For example, Martinez Bordon (2003) showed how girls working collectively with peers and parents could foster change in inequitable practices in schools.

### 2.1. The study: methods and participants

The research presented in this paper was based on situation analyses designed to map and analyze the gender and education issues in Bangladeshi and Malawian schools and communities where, subsequently, gender-responsive educational interventions would be designed and implemented.

#### 2.1.1. Communities in the study: Bangladesh

The Bangladesh case study draws on data collected in seven villages in Sunamganj District in Sylhet, on Bangladesh's northern border with India. Sylhet is the region with the highest percentage of fifteen to nineteen year olds with no education (Schuler, 2007, p. 182). Despite low educational achievement, poorer districts, such as Sunamganj, are not necessarily receiving additional government resources (Al-Samarrai, 2009). Environmental conditions, in addition to economic and social structures, vary considerably within and across these villages. The district is a flood plain and most villages are flooded for several months each year, making boats the primary means of transportation. The main occupations in these villages are fishing, agricultural production and collecting firewood. Many families migrate during part of the year for seasonal labor. The majority population is Bengali Muslim, though Hindus are a majority in one village, and Garos, most of whom are currently practicing Christianity, comprise a substantial group in another village.

Each village in which research was conducted has a government and/or NGO primary school. Additionally, the upazila<sup>9</sup> center to which the villages belong also has a secondary school and a primary school. Literacy rates in these villages ranged from 18 to 40%, with the exception of one village, which had a literacy rate of 79%. Based on commonly used poverty indicators, these villages are characterized as poor and marginalized, and in many respects they differ from the national picture portrayed above regarding the country's success with increasing educational participation and gender parity. For example, the parity ratio for all grades in these communities was .85 in contrast with the national average that favors girls; additionally, by grades 4 and 5, there are more boys than girls enrolled across all these communities. Furthermore,

<sup>8</sup> A more detailed discussion of the framework can be found in Miske et al. (2010).

<sup>9</sup> An upazila is a sub-district, in this case a sub-district of Sunamganj.

none of the women, but 40% of the men, who participated in this study had completed primary school.

### 2.1.2. Communities in the study: Malawi

The Malawi case study draws on data collected in seven school catchment areas and the rural villages that they serve in Kasungu district, Central region, Malawi. The population in the villages was almost entirely Christian, and consisted mostly of Tumbuka (patrilineal) and Chewa (matrilineal) members.

Kasungu district is wealthy in comparison to other districts in Malawi; its wealth is generated largely from tobacco sales. Tobacco requires a great deal of capital, family labor, and land. For much of the year, growing tobacco is less food secure than growing food crops, and family food security is increasingly dependent on money from tobacco sales circulating back into the household. Scarce (and lower-paid than men's) formal labor opportunities for women, the demand for fertilizer and other investments to grow tobacco, and the predominantly male control over tobacco sales maintain many women's dependence on men for financial and labor inputs into the crop. This has left many women with less, rather than more, access to money and control over family food security and survival than before the sharp increase in smallholder tobacco farming that accompanied the 1994 political transition (Ideh et al., 2010). Women's survival is also affected by a lack of physical security in and out of school, reflecting the well-documented gender violence in the district and country (Ideh et al., 2010).

### 2.2. Research participants and methods

Qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques, including structured and semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, classroom observations, and collection of school data, were utilized in Bangladesh and Malawi to collect information about educational experiences and outcomes from in- and out-of-school girls and boys, teachers, parents, and school officials. In each case, both shared (cross-case) and unique (local) qualitative and quantitative data collection methods and items were developed based on the gender and education transformation conceptual framework, described above. Shared items were incorporated into research plans and data collection protocols that also reflected the different intervention goals and project foci of each site; thus, differences in participant populations and research methods reflect the NGO's local office determination of the information needed to support the longitudinal, evidence-based intervention that they were developing. For example, data were collected from students in the grades that would be directly targeted by the project (grades 1–5 in Bangladesh, 4–6 in Malawi). School Management Committees (SMCs) were targeted to receive training in the Bangladeshi sites so all members who were to participate in the training were interviewed. In contrast, teachers were targeted for teacher training in the Malawi sites; therefore, more teachers were interviewed in Malawi. Table 3 shows the participant groups and methods used to collect data in each case.

While the different participants and methods used in each country case responded to local needs, the core set of common items for students, teachers, and community members, woven through the case's protocols, assured comparability of topics and research approaches across the cases. The analysis below relies largely on these common items.

The common items for students asked questions related to all four gender and education dimensions. For example, for attainment, students discussed their attendance, participation, and achievement in school, and their perceptions of the value of what they had learned. For empowerment, students talked about their educational and future aspirations, educational rights, and ability

to participate in decisions about school. Girls and boys were asked about their perceptions of each others' learning, intelligence and participation in social life. Children drew maps of places in the school and community where they could go safely and places that were unsafe and shared stories about people who were powerful within their communities.

Common items for parents, community members and school management committees focused on their perceptions of girls' and boys' learning abilities and opportunities, and on the dimensions of equality and structural and relational empowerment. Parents were asked about their support for education (for example, whether they ordered their children to attend school, supported their homework, or required work that might inhibit school participation). Focus groups, segregated by men and women, asked parents and community members to discuss safe and unsafe spaces for girls and boys. In Bangladesh, a separate focus group was conducted that included a community mapping and social power analysis, indicating the people, places and relations that foster and inhibit girls' and boys' participation in schooling.

Finally, common interview and observation items for teachers focused on the dimensions of quality and equality. Teachers were observed interacting with girls and boys and implementing the curriculum to determine their inclusion of gender-responsive topics, roles, and norms in their classroom. Teacher interviews explored the attitudes and beliefs teachers held about girls' and boys' learning and social roles.

## 3. Findings

Both case studies focused on school-aged children and their gendered educational experiences. The research designs included a sample of overlapping but not identical segments of the schools and communities and collected shared and unique data from similar actors. Despite these differences in starting points, methods, and environments, the findings regarding gender parity, equity, and empowerment were quite similar. Two intersecting themes illustrated persistent gender inequities in schools and communities: gender discrimination related to adults' perceptions of girls' versus boys' social worth, capacities, and educational needs (including what constituted a quality learning environment), and gender-based and sexual violence. The findings from both case studies illustrate that support for learning, the quality of the learning experience, and attitudes about learning capabilities are biased against girls throughout school and society. In both Bangladesh and Malawi, these biases were related to family and social role expectations for females and the perceived capacity (or lack thereof) of schooling to provide women with improved financial opportunities. Additionally, economic, social, and political structures in society did not provide opportunities for educated girls. Formal or public business opportunities in these communities were largely either closed to women or provided much higher remuneration for men's labor, there were few opportunities for girls to act as leaders in their communities, and marriage arrangements were sometimes more onerous for girls' families if they were highly educated. These biases against girls were produced and reproduced through interactions among school, family, community, and broader socio-cultural and political economic systems.

### 3.1. Educational attainment and experiences: discriminatory schools, families, and communities

To a greater (Malawi) or lesser (Bangladesh) extent, boys' and girls' performance in the schools in which we conducted research (hereafter, "the schools"), as measured by exams and school grades, was increasingly equal. This was particularly true in the

**Table 3**  
Participants and data collection activities.

Setting/group	Bangladesh		Malawi	
	Methods	Participants	Methods	Participants
Primary age in-school girls/boys	Questionnaires	26 grade 3–5 girls and 24 boys	Questionnaires	240 standard 4–6 girls and boys
	Focus group discussions	8 girls/boys groups	Focus group discussions	80 girls and boys in groups of 4–8
Primary age out-of-school girls/boy	Questionnaires	12 girls and 16 boys	Life histories and interviews	6 drop-outs/teen mothers
	Focus group discussions	8 girls/boys groups		
Community members and parents (M/F)	Community power analysis	44 mothers and fathers	Household questionnaire	240 household members/parents
Teachers and head teachers	Questionnaire			
Data collected from schools	Interviews	9, grades 3–5	Interviews, classroom observations, and focus group discussions	4 head teachers, 32 teachers in grades 4–6
School management committees, community leaders	Student attendance, completion and achievement data	Grades 1–5	Student attendance, drop-out and achievement data	Standards 4–6
	Focus group discussions and participatory research activities	11 community groups	Interviews, focus group discussions, and participatory research activities	32 SMC members and community leaders
Gender and education officials (district and national)			Key informant interviews	4 district officials; 30 gender and education experts

younger grades. Despite this evidence of their academic capacity, girls' schooling experiences were marked by consistent discrimination from their schools, families, and communities. Discrimination was linked to women's future roles as wives and mothers and the perception that schooling was not useful for—and might even be antithetical to—these roles. It touched girls at home, when decisions were made about whether and how to invest in their education; on their way to school, when decisions were made about how at risk they were in their walk to school; in the schoolyard and classrooms, as teachers and peers interacted with each other and made decisions about resource distribution; and as they left school and interacted with gender inequitable labor markets, family hierarchies, social services, and laws. Discrimination restricted the capacity of girls' schooling experiences to transform gender norms or relations or to empower girls (as defined in the conceptual framework), as the quality of teaching and learning, teachers' support for and relations with students, and parents' and community members' support was qualitatively different for girls versus boys in these schools and communities, and overwhelmingly disfavored girls.

How did systemic discrimination look and feel to girls? In the communities in Bangladesh, the average gender parity ratio over all grades was .85; however, by grades 4 and 5, and continuing through the rest of primary school, there were more boys than girls in school. Girls, boys, fathers and mothers alike reported that girls could not exercise their right to education, were less safe at school, and were not supported by their parents to participate in school. The data in Table 4 illustrate the discrepancies between the support for

schooling that girls versus boys were reported to receive. These data suggest that girls, parents and community members held more negative views about girls' than boys' rights to attend schools and to have a voice in family decisions made about schooling.

In an earlier study in Bangladesh, Schuler (2007) found that attitudes toward girls' education are shifting, particularly about enrolling girls and having them complete a primary education. Schuler argues, however, that broader gender norms about education and post-school life are not changing. Indeed, in these communities, gender attitudes and norms did not appear to have shifted substantively to support girls' education beyond the first few years—that is, before pubertal differentiation and girls' workloads begin to increase. The roles, norms and attitudes held by community interviewees reinforced the idea that schooling is not necessary for most girls and if a girl is schooled, it is to be a better wife. Similarly, Raynor (2008) argues in her research in Bangladesh that schooling for girls is often regarded as useful primarily for becoming a better wife, and that the curriculum does not disrupt these commonly held ideas about gendered roles.

In the Bangladesh communities included in the study, 100% of the women worked in unpaid household labor, including care of children, home, and fields. Only 20% of the women reported having paid work, most often informal, small-scale trading of goods. In contrast, most men in the community worked as traders, paid laborers, or farmers. Schooling was often described as an important investment in men's future earning and leadership capacities.

Educational quality, as measured by school exams, appeared to be low for girls and boys, but family responses to low quality were

**Table 4**  
Support for educational participation of girls and boys in Bangladesh, percentage of respondents.

	Girl respondents	Boy respondents	Mother/female community member	Father/male community member
Girls can never exercise right to education	13%		11%	
Boys can never exercise their right to education		1%		0%
Girls rarely feel safe at school	12%		30%	
Boys rarely feel safe at school		0		0
Sons can never participate in decision to go to school				15%
Daughters can never participate in decision to go to school				25%
Support boys to go to school			80%	
Support girls to go to school			44%	

gendered. Nearly 50% of boys and girls received marks of less than 20% for all three terms in grades 1–5, with girls having slightly lower marks overall. Girls were also slightly less represented in the higher achieving categories. Nationally, only 54% of all primary children survived to grade 5 (Global Monitoring Report, 2006).

In response to the poor quality and lack of teaching, a shadow education system of private lessons after school hours has emerged in these communities in Bangladesh. However, girls often reported less support from their parents for private lessons than did boys, consistent with international data indicating lower family investment in girls' schooling than boys' (Hannum et al., 2009). One reason some girls suggested for lower parental investment in girls' tutoring was having a one-on-one lesson with a young male teacher leaves young girls vulnerable to sexual harassment and violence; this is discussed in the next section.

Overall, Bangladeshi girls in the communities were not able to enact their right to education equally with boys in the communities, and they received less support from their mothers, fathers and other community members to do so. Despite nearly parous enrollment and achievement indicators, girls encountered gender discrimination from teachers and parents and lower family investment in educational resources, such as tutoring (Dejaeghere and Lee, 2011).

The discriminatory behavior that girls faced at home and in schools was reported to have severe negative consequences for their educational well-being. Nearly half the Bangladeshi mothers and girls in the study said there was little to no support for girls to go to school. Parents responded that they regarded school support for girls to be more costly in terms of providing clothes and supplies, and they did not equally support girls to study at home or be tutored, as noted above. This discriminatory pattern was not strongly related to the household work girls were expected to do in the first few years of school, as many parents commented that when girls are young, they do limited work at home. Rather, and as has been noted in previous research (Raynor, 2005) the lack of support for schooling and studying was related to social norms regarding girls' future role as a married woman whose labor would be in her husband's home and who would not be providing for her birth family. To fulfill these roles, girls needed to learn how to cook, clean, farm, and so forth, skills that were not viewed as best learned in school.

In Malawi, the analysis revealed similar deeply held biases against girls and their intelligence and capabilities. Girls enrolled in the schools at higher rates than boys and performed at the same rate as boys in school and national exams. In fact, data from examination results and head teacher and teachers' focus groups indicated that in the previous two years, girls had surpassed boys in examination pass rates in most surveyed schools. Nevertheless, as in Bangladesh, every stakeholder group involved in the situation analysis held lower views about older girls' than older boys' intelligence and capabilities.

The biases, discrimination, and physical and psychological insecurities that girls faced in these communities in Malawi were more closely linked to girl students' sexualization than in the Bangladesh case. For example, many teachers said that girls were less intelligent than boys, but this widely held view was usually age-specific: teachers said that girls are smarter than boys at young ages, but not when they are older. For example, a teacher in a focus group discussion noted that: "*in the infant level both boys and girls perform well because they are still young and have equal opportunities and they do not have gender attitudes as they learn a lot together*". In contrast to Bangladesh, where parents, teachers, and students held biased beliefs about girls' capacity from the start of primary school, in the Malawi case teachers' and parents' differentiation of girl learners from boys largely developed after puberty. Some teachers and parents even claimed that girls were smarter and better students than boys in the early primary grades, because boys did not sit still

and concentrate as well as girls. As girls became capable of becoming wives and mothers, however, adult and youth perceptions of their right and capacity to participate in schooling declined. From being called names for being "too old", to being mocked if they tried to return to school after dropping out for marriage or pregnancy, to increasing family demands on their time for household chores, girls reported that they received the message that once they were physically mature, they were no longer "good" students. Boys did not receive this message from teachers or their peers.

These findings confirm earlier studies conducted in Malawi, indicating the persistence of these discriminatory attitudes. A 2000 study observed that teachers' impressions of girls were less favorable than of boys. Chimombo et al. (2000) cite teachers in Kainja and Mkandawire as saying, "Boys are perceived to be intelligent, hardworking, motivated and co-operative while girls are perceived to be easy to control, passive, calm, and submissive" (p. 12). Girls were described by interviewees as being less "serious" and "capable" in Davison and Kanyuka's study (1992, p. 454). Kadzamira and Chibwana (2000) reported that teachers see girls' participation in class as a poor use of time, and Davison and Kanyuka (1992) noted that Malawian teachers hold different levels of expectations for girls and boys.

This mix of sexualizing female pupils and holding diminished views about older girls' abilities transformed the safety, security, and utility of schooling for girls and boys. For example, girls and boys agreed that boys received more punishments and were often treated more harshly than girls at school because male teachers wanted to engage in sexual relationships with the girls and so treated girls better so that when they proposed "love" to them the girls should not refuse. Thus, pupils widely believed that teachers treated boys and girls unfairly, and in cases where girls were treated favorably by teachers, it was for sexual purposes. This denigrated girls' educational achievements, relegated female students to the role of possible sexual partner, and placed boys and teachers in competition for girls. Likewise, when girls were diminished by teachers, parents and pupils reported that it was usually done in a sexual manner, while for boys it was not. Several focus group discussions with parents and students, for example, reported that teachers make comments to older girls such as "you are very dull, why can't you just get married?", "Look at her body, like a mother", and called older girls names like "grandmother", "mother", and "postpartum woman" that were meant to degrade their status as students.

The analysis in Malawi revealed that patterns of discrimination in the school echoed and built upon socio-cultural practices, norms, and values at the household and community levels that deprived girls of their rights to education, physical safety, and survival opportunities. About 64% of men and 56% of women said boys were more intelligent than girls, while only 12% of men and 16% of women said that girls were more intelligent than boys. The analysis also revealed some of the mechanisms through which gender discrimination disadvantaged girls in schooling: about three-quarters of all parents reported that boys had more time after school for schoolwork, while 95% of parents agreed that girls' schooling was more disrupted with household chores.

Parents in some communities did not encourage their children's education, but this was particularly true for girls because parents viewed early marriage as the appropriate outcome for girls who had reached puberty. In these cases, as in Bangladesh, girls were kept home to learn domestic labor and "appropriate" reproductive roles, and encouraged to marry early. For example, all parent focus group discussants agreed that girls should get married earlier than boys, usually with a large gap (e.g. 18 years versus 25 years). Many said that older girls were dull-witted and too focused on sexual relationships, and some parents said they were afraid of girls getting pregnant out of wedlock, a finding that echoed Chimombo



et al.'s (2000) report. Parents also had gendered expectations for girls' futures that were very similar to those found in Bangladesh: Boys were described as leaders in society and as such needed to be educated. Girls were expected to marry and have children, roles that were viewed as not requiring education. Boys were expected to be heads of households supporting their family; on the other hand, as one mother said in a focus group discussion, "*educating a girl child is a waste of resources because she will be spending her income on her husband and not on her parents.*" All of these norms worked against older girls remaining in school.

Gendered discrimination patterns as experienced by these participants built on assumptions about girls' "natural" roles as sexual partner and mother. In both the Bangladesh and Malawi cases, these roles were viewed as antithetical to the role of student, and schooling was viewed as comparably useless for girls because they had fewer economic opportunities linked to schooling than boys, because their labor would be in the home (unpaid) and often in the service of their husband's families, and because it could make girls less tractable wives and mothers. Discrimination against girls and/in their schooling led to and fed gender-based violence in the schools and communities in which the research was conducted.

#### 4. Equality, empowerment, and schooling: gender-based violence and sexual abuse

The complexities of gender-based violence in relation to schooling suggest that being enrolled in school or getting an education has not transformed deeply rooted gender inequities in Bangladesh or Malawi. The schools were sites of both gender discrimination and violence. For the Bangladeshi participants, issues of gender-based violence were most evident in community reports of violence and direct physical abuse of girls and women. For example, girls reported systematically lower protection from abuse than boys and higher expectations for abuse to occur in both the community and in school. Nearly a third of the girls and boys reported they did not feel safe in the community; in contrast, no boys felt unsafe in school and 12% of girls rarely felt safe in school. Additionally, more than half of the girls who participated in the study said they did not feel they could enact their rights to be protected from abuse and violence at school or at home.

When in- and out-of-school girls in Bangladesh were asked what they were most concerned about related to abuse and violence, the most common theme was acid throwing. Acid throwing is a form of domestic violence in which most commonly a husband or male family member throws acid on the face or other body parts, burning and deforming the woman. The victim often survives and endures long-term emotional, psychological and physical challenges, including living in secret to avoid shame. Adolescent women have been a target of this violence, despite it now being a criminal act. In addition to this extreme form of violence, girls were also concerned about not being able to move around the village freely, often referring to unsafe paths or areas for girls. One explanation for this violence, as Schuler (2007) found in her research, is that men perpetrated acts of violence in response to the changing roles that girls and women were taking, including attending school.

Gender-based violence is not only a concern for girls when they are young; they and adults expect it to persist into adulthood. In this study, only about a third of the Bangladeshi women, but all of the men, reported they had a right to be free from abuse and violence. Moreover, half of the female respondents said they could never or only seldom exercise their right to be free from abuse and violence. Similarly, mothers felt that their daughters did not have a right to be protected from abuse and violence, and that the community did not protect girls from such violence. In contrast,

boys' concerns about abuse and violence most often related to harsh discipline by teachers or parents, or being teased by other boys in school. These statements suggest that girls and women were most concerned about sexual and/or domestic violence, and this violence was widespread in the schools and communities in Bangladesh. Boys, on the other hand, were concerned about being disciplined for bad behavior in the school and at home, while men were comparably unconcerned about violence being inflicted on them.

The most prominent reasons Bangladeshi interviewees gave for girls not being able to participate in school were related to safety in the school and teachers' treatment of girls and boys, including beating or harsh punishment by the teachers and teasing from boys on the way to or in school. Male and female community members echoed these concerns of differential treatment of teachers toward girls and boys; 25% of the parents felt that teachers treated the boys better than the girls, while the rest felt they were treated equally.

The lack of support for girls' education, the extent of violence and abuse reported by women and girls in the school and community, and the relationships between these two factors suggest that gendered discrimination persists in attitudes and practices within and outside the school, and that in some cases, girls' changing participation in school increases their risk.

In the Malawi case, the situation analysis asked fewer questions about gender-based violence, and reports of such violence were less extreme than in Bangladesh. However, reports of gender discriminatory and abusive behavior that significantly and negatively affected girls' schooling were widespread. The most prominent of these appeared to be linked to the sexualization of girls in school settings. Discrimination against girls that aimed to denigrate their intellectual capacity and recast their only appropriate role as one of sexual partner created an environment in which teacher–pupil relationships—that is, sexual abuse—was viewed as commonplace. There is a long history in Malawi of reports of teachers having sex with schoolgirls (e.g., Chanika, 2003); this study found that reports of such behaviors in the participating schools were declining, but that such cases were still common enough to lead girls and boys to assume that teachers' disciplinary interactions with students were fueled primarily by their efforts to form sexual relationships with schoolgirls.

As in the case with discrimination in schools and communities, and in contrast with Bangladesh, schools in Malawi appeared to be less violent sites for girls than their homes and villages. Interviewees indicated that sexual abuse of girls by adult family members was more widespread than abuse by male teachers, for example. Nonetheless, reports of male teacher–female student relations, girls' deep concerns about male peers "peeping privates" (looking up their skirts) when they stood up to respond to a question in their classroom, and boys' reports that grabbing female students' breasts and buttocks was common and unproblematic at school pointed to the gendered violence that continued to predominate in school and community settings alike. While schools may have offered a safer environment than home for some students, they did not attempt to transform the gender norms that made such behavior in schools and communities reasonable and commonplace.

#### 5. Discussion

An analysis of these two cases reveals similar patterns of widely held beliefs concerning the relative intelligence, goodness, and future life opportunities of girls versus boys in the Bangladesh and Malawi research settings. Gender inequitable norms were widely held by male and female community and school actors, including by children themselves.

Gender inequitable beliefs related to schooling were strongly linked to expectations that girls' most important roles would be those of mother and wife; the skills needed to be a good wife and mother were not learned at school. These expectations were often coupled with natal families' belief that girls would be working (as wives and mothers) to support their husband's, not their natal, family,<sup>10</sup> and investment in girl's schooling was therefore less likely to yield a return to parents than investment in boys'. There were rigid expectations that girls would fulfill age-appropriate roles within and outside of the home; as girls grew older, they were given less time to study and more household chores, and, in Malawi especially, they were also more likely to be approached by boys and men with sexual intent.<sup>11</sup>

In both cases, girls also faced sexually charged, gender inequitable school settings. Teachers reported not believing girls and boys were equally intelligent, and particularly in Malawi, male teachers regularly sexualized their interactions with students. While schools' expectations for girls' academic performance were lower than for boys (even when girls' performance was equal to that of boys on school exams), family and community expectations were often even lower and in many cases were actively discouraging of girls' educational aspirations. In both cases, discouragement came in part from concerns about girls' future marriageability if they were "overeducated" but unemployed—a common occurrence for girls with a secondary school degree in both settings. Whether schools or communities (or locations between them) were viewed as more or less physically dangerous to girls varied by school, community, and the age of students, but these concerns also played a key role in family and peers discouraging girls from attending school.

Gender inequitable norms and beliefs were certainly not limited to girls' schooling; they reflected wider norms concerning the secondary status of women throughout the lifecycle. From teachers, parents, and girls themselves reporting on girls' lesser capacity for schooling, to women's unpaid labor load, to the 16% gender gap in the Malawian formal labor force, to women's lower pay than men for comparable work, to high rates of gender-based violence in marriage, to constraints on women's ability to own land and other resources, to the much higher rates of poverty among female-headed homes in both countries, females throughout the lifecycle experienced routine, and sometimes violent, messages that they did not have equal rights or capacities to men.

We found limited evidence that girls' educational experiences modeled significantly different gender norms than the communities', or that by being educated, girls experienced a transformation in the gender inequalities they faced in their families or communities. Although in Malawi, schools and school officials that participated in this study appeared to be slightly more gender equitable in their actions and beliefs than parents or community members, in both countries schools did not challenge widely held assumptions about gender norms and relations. Gender relations within the school both produced and mirrored those in society (for example, in school officials' and students' assumptions that women are less intelligent than men, in teachers turning a blind eye to male students' sexual abuse of female students, or in unequal leadership opportunities for female and male teachers), and in both cases, there were widespread reports of discrimination and abuse occurring in the schools that participated in the research.

<sup>10</sup> This was not the case for matrilineal families in Malawi, where girls' labor is not lost to the natal family upon marriage.

<sup>11</sup> Because the region in Malawi in which the study was conducted is largely matrilineal, there was less concern from parents about controlling girls' sexuality or about "losing their investment" in girls' schooling by girls losing their virginity than there is in largely patrilineal areas of the country.

Gender inequities in broader social, economic, and political structures affect and are affected by schools. The pervasive social, economic, and political gender inequities in both countries significantly limited the schools' capacity to provide an alternate, transformative vision of gender norms and relations. Instead, these gender biases were reflected in school-based discrimination, abuse, and violence against girls, particularly as they approached adolescence. Females' formal and informal remunerative labor opportunities after school were limited in these two rural areas, reinforcing the belief that schooling beyond the first few years was not useful for girls, as they would "only" be wives and mothers. Interactions among schooling, social relations, and economic opportunity perpetuated the dichotomous norm (widespread in communities and schools alike) that girls belong married, docile, and in the home rather than educated, "empowered", and participating in public life.

If education for girls poses possibilities for being transformative—that is, it plays roles beyond preparing girls to be wives and mothers in a manner that perpetuates existing familial hierarchies—then girls' participation in schooling affects men's lives and roles as well and they may respond by resisting these transformations. Schuler et al. (1998), in their study of women's microcredit programs in Bangladesh, suggest that violence can be an unfortunate consequence of shifting gender norms and roles. Men who were not able to provide for their family financially, while their wives were able to do so through microcredit programs, were infuriated as they felt they were no longer the breadwinner; as a result, incidences of domestic violence increased. Girls and women in both Bangladesh and Malawi were concerned about sexual and domestic violence perpetrated by males in school, on girls' way to school, and at home. These concerns both negatively affected girls' opportunities to go to school and to learn, and limited the transformational power of the school in fostering new visions of positive gender relations.

As critical feminist approaches demand, beyond seeing violence and abuse as a problem for women and girls, these issues call for greater attention to women's and men's relations and to dominant norms of masculinities and femininities (Dunne, 2009). For example, schools and communities need to grapple with questions such as: what is expected of girls/women and boys/men with regard to their roles and behaviors in school and at home? How are girls/women and boys/men to be cared for and disciplined at home and in school? How do social norms concerning parenting, laboring, and male control over females systematically construct different and inequitable life opportunities for females and males? How can schools interrupt inequitable gender roles and norms so as to serve girls and boys in their educational well-being? Formal curricula and policies are only partial in effecting change in these arenas, which must be addressed in both the community and the school, and in both formal and informal relations (Dunne, 2009).

## 6. Conclusion

The implicit promise that girls' equal participation in schooling will transform gender relations and empower women does not appear to be the case in these communities. The complexities of schooling practices, labor and marriage markets, family survival tactics, and gendered family, community, and school relations significantly impact whether and how schooling does and might play a transformative role in people's individual lives and in fostering gender equity. We have argued in this paper that in both Bangladesh and Malawi, a rapid increase in girls' enrollment in primary schools has made a significant difference in how many girls have the opportunity to enter school and to potentially gain basic literacy and numeracy skills; this is cause for celebration and signals the success of government, NGO, community, and family

efforts to transform norms concerning girls' enrollment in school. However, parity in school enrollment has not signaled an end to (or transformation of) gender inequities in the schools or communities studied. Indeed, the evidence from these communities about how gender and schooling interact to shape community and school norms and practical possibilities for the future does not reinforce the assumptions or the predictive power of current frameworks such as the EFA agreements and the MDGs, for understanding and promulgating gender equity through achieving parity in school enrollment of girls and boys.

Neo-marxist and critical education researchers have argued that Western-style, formal schooling reproduces social inequities in many postcolonial settings (e.g., Carnoy, 1974; Samoff, 1999). Other researchers have adeptly described the fundamentally transformative (but not necessarily positive) socio-cultural effects of postcolonial schooling, including on gendered expectations and relations (Serpell, 1993; Stambach, 2000), illustrating the complex ways in which schools function in practice as both productive and reproductive social sites. While the data collected for these case studies indicated some specific ways in which schools may be producing new gender norms and practices, in general, the schools were not playing a significant role in creating more equitable gender relations. Rather, the social transformation that occurs from having more girls in schools seems to prompt continued and sometimes new forms of gender discrimination. When unjust norms and structural practices are not systematically addressed, institutionalized discriminatory attitudes and violence may become more apparent.

The realities of gender relations in these schools and communities suggest that increased educational enrollment and retention parity incompletely characterizes and measures increased gender equity in schools and communities. Such measures fail to capture important information about students' experiences of discrimination and violence in school and fail to account for the results of interactions among school and community norms and practices, whether they be to foster transformation, create a backlash, or simply further burden women. The expectation that girls worked at home and went to school while boys went to school or worked for money, is the beginning of an inequitable "double-shift" pattern that marks gendered labor patterns around the world (Landrine and Klonoff, 2002) but that is seldom recognized in international efforts to increase girls' access to school or to improve their performance. Many current models of expected educational empowerment outcomes did not seem to be playing out among the rapidly increasing number of young women who were enrolled in schooling in the research sites. They did not have increased formal wage labor opportunities, and they continued to face the same gendered options for social and economic survival and thriving—options largely tied to traditional (ist) sexual and reproductive roles.

Critical theorists have been arguing, especially since the MDGs, that gender parity in schooling is too narrow a measure to capture desired international improvements in gender equity. These case studies support these arguments and point to at least two ways in which school-based gender equity efforts might be reconsidered. First, they indicate the need to explore other models of schooling that might, by virtue of their particular attention to issues of gender relations, be more transformative of school practices and social norms (Murphy-Graham, 2009; Bartlett, 2007). Second, they point to the complex interrelations between schools and the social, cultural, economic, legal and political environments in which they operate. As both reproductive and productive spaces, efforts to reform schooling will need to be accompanied by concomitant social, economic, political, and legal reforms at the community, national, and international levels. These reforms would need to address the changing, though persistent, inequities that girls experience in homes, communities, labor markets, courts, hospi-

tals, and schools; and the gender relations that affect both men's and women's capacity to live together as they wish.

International development education programs in Bangladesh (such as BRAC), Malawi (such as the Girls' Attainment in Basic Literacy and Education Social Mobilization Campaign), and around the world have been successful in increasing parity in schools and improving school–community relations. We know much less, however, about which policy, system, and program models might affect gender equity (e.g., 3ie, 2009). The failure of other school reform programs to affect gender relations and gender equity, even when they positively affected parity or quality (e.g. Kendall, 2008), suggest that improving gender equity in schools will require, at a minimum: a gender responsive approach to be incorporated into multiple aspects of schooling reform models, from curriculum and pedagogy, to administration and leadership, to infrastructure development and teacher training, to policy and data management; a much more systematic and thorough consideration of the value students and their parents attribute to education, to educational attainment's linkage with economic and social opportunities, and to the role education does and can play to advance women's positions in society; and new frameworks for conceptualizing and measuring equity as a central aspect of international development education outcome measures. This means that transforming gender inequities through schooling will require transformations in interactions and relations from the classroom through the global level be transformed; and in this regard, there are few models of success at these multiple levels.

It was striking that the gender norms and expectations concerning schooling and girls' and boys' futures were so similar between these communities as regards the issues of social expectations (particularly related to unpaid domestic labor and motherhood) and gender discrimination and violence. These findings point to two areas in which further research, programming, and policymaking in and out of school, within and across countries, might be fruitfully considered.

If future research and policymaking are to increase equity, then consideration need to be given to how schools could play transformative roles, including countering newly emergent forms of injustice, by setting new institutional expectations and practices to directly address the interactions between in- and out-of-school forces that shape the models of gender relations available for schools to promulgate. At the same time, schools cannot be solely tasked with such transformation. By acknowledging and mapping the interrelations among schools and the broader systems in which they are embedded—societies, families, labor markets, marital and childrearing practices, sexual norms, health systems, political practices, legal systems, and so forth—advocates and policymakers can attempt more holistic reforms to address the gender inequities that are produced and reproduced across these arenas. A range of alternatives-to-development approaches—from unconditional cash transfers (Hanlon et al., 2010), to collective socio-ecological frameworks (Escobar, 2008), to gender mainstreaming, reproductive justice, and transnational women's movements (Jaquette and Summerfield, 2006), to postcapitalist economies and activist movements (Gibson-Graham, 2006)—offer potential starting points for reexamining current assumptions about gender, equity, development, and schooling and building more transformative educational and cross-sectoral efforts to improve the lives of women, men, and children around the world.

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