

Primary School Is Not Enough: Proposal for Safe and Affordable Secondary School for Girls in Malawi

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Girls in Malawi face innumerable challenges to their education and are far less likely to graduate from secondary school than boys. Research shows that secondary education benefits girls, their future families, and their communities immeasurably. Still, there is no program in Malawi that makes secondary school affordable for disadvantaged girls. Having achieved near 100 percent primary school enrollment for all children, Malawi needs a campaign to promote secondary education for girls in order to capitalize on past progress, help girls break out of poverty, and promote a healthier and more productive nation.

Introduction

This article urges the government of Malawi and civil society, in partnership with international donors, to launch a campaign for affordable, safe secondary education for girls based on the following components:

- A review and overhaul of the current bursary scheme
- A large-scale secondary school scholarship program to complement current US Agency for International Development (USAID)-funded and other programs for primary school girls
- A gender-responsive social mobilization initiative to ensure girls' safety and equal treatment within secondary schools

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Girls are significantly less likely to be eligible to enroll in secondary school than boys and are at much greater risk of dropping out. In fact, 31 percent of girls and 40 percent of boys complete primary school, but only 11 percent of all girls in Malawi graduate from secondary school, compared to 20 percent of boys.¹ By investing in disadvantaged girls, Malawi can build on successful programs for girls in the primary sector, help girls break out of poverty, and contribute to the health and well-being of girls' future families. The proposed campaign, which is in line with the national objective of gender parity at the post-primary level, should complement, not replace, current primary and secondary policy and should be based on methodologies that are currently implemented in the primary education sector.

Background

Despite important gains at the primary and post-primary level, girls in Malawi are still significantly underrepresented at the higher grades of primary school and at the secondary level. In 2000, only 31 percent of women completed primary school, as compared to 40 percent of men. At the secondary level, fewer girls complete school in absolute terms and relative to boys: in 2000, only 11 percent of women completed secondary school, as compared to 20 percent of men (National Statistical Office 2001 in Ngwira, Kamchedzera, and Semu 2003, p. 2-22).

Girls in Malawi face myriad challenges that specifically impact their ability to enroll, participate, and succeed in the educative system, especially at the post-primary level. Pervasive poverty in Malawi, where the average person lives on US \$156 per year, leaves little cash available for school fees at the post-primary level (United Nations Statistics Division 2006). If parents can only afford to send one child to school, they will send a son

rather than a daughter, assuming that an educated son will earn more in the labor market than an educated daughter.

Ideas about a girl's role interfere with education in various ways. Girls are expected to help their mothers with labor-intensive household chores before going to school and therefore often arrive to class late and exhausted. Because of such responsibilities, girls are less likely than boys to have spare time to raise small amounts of cash for necessary school expenses, such as uniforms. Girls face enormous pressure to marry once they have reached puberty, and once a girl in rural Malawi is married, she is expected to discontinue her education to stay home as a wife and mother (Scharff and Brady 2006²).

Boys dominate post-primary classrooms in terms of enrollment and participation and often deride girls that answer questions in class. Teachers, male students, and even mothers often think that girls are lazy, passive, inferior, dull, or not oriented toward education.³ These ideas lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy, as girls become discouraged and often perform at a lower level than boys.⁴

Girls are vulnerable to abuse, both while in transit and when at school. Girls are exposed during long commutes, particularly at the secondary level when schools tend to be further from villages and the peer group tends to be smaller. To avoid the lengthy walk, some girls make their own lodging arrangements near community day schools that do not offer boarding facilities. These "self-boarders" are unsupervised by the school and are therefore at risk of theft and abuse (Scharff and Brady 2006). Girls have little recourse if they are abused in school. If girls and their families fear repercussions or are too ashamed to report incidents, girls may drop out to prevent a repeat incident.

Sexual practices outside of school, if they result in pregnancy or illness, can prevent girls from realizing their right to education. During puberty-initiation ceremonies practiced in some communities, elderly men are invited to have sex with young girls, exposing girls to HIV/AIDS and pregnancy.⁵ HIV/AIDS infection rate patterns indicate that older men are infecting younger girls through initiation rites and other encounters.⁶ If a girl falls pregnant or ill as a result, she will likely drop out of school.

The situation for women in the home and workforce illustrates the continuing need for programs to educate and empower women. The Malawian constitution provides for the equal treatment of women in all spheres, but in the domestic, political, and social arenas women continue to face various forms of discrimination (Freedom House 2006). Men hold 97 percent of decision- and policy-making posts and dominate the labor market and traditional leadership structures (Ngwira, Kamchedzera, and Semu 2003, p. 2-22). In the household, women rarely have control over resource allocation, even when they contribute to household income. A third of women indicate that they consider it acceptable for their husbands to beat them (National Statistical Office 2001 in Ngwira, Kamchedzera, and Semu 2003, p. 2-22). Such expectations and disparities limit many women's and girls' human rights, including their right to education, to decide whom and when to marry, and to control their own reproductive health.

The Policy & Investment Framework and Civil Society

The Policy & Investment Framework (PIF), which outlines the Malawian education sector goals for 2001 to 2012, focuses on primary education. The PIF states that this focus will yield the highest social returns and “a more economically active, informed, healthier and participatory population” (Malawi SDNP 2001). A similar rationale guided international and

national thinking in the early 1990s and led Malawi to abolish school fees at the primary level. Malawi has made tremendous progress in the primary school sector, achieving near 100 percent primary school enrollment for all children through this policy and supporting programs to mobilize communities and support girls,⁷ although some measures indicate that the overall quality of primary education has decreased since 1994.⁸

Malawi has made important gains in terms of girls' enrollment and female literacy rates. The abolishment of school fees at the primary level in 1994 made school accessible for many more girls, and complementary programs improved conditions for girls through financial support and community mobilization. These actions led to an increase in the girls' primary enrollment rate from 47 percent in 1991 to 98 percent in 2004 and an increase in the ratio of literate women to men from .68 in 1990 to .82 in 2004 (United Nations Statistics Division 2006). The construction of new secondary schools, in addition to the increase in primary school graduates, may have contributed to the increase in gross secondary school enrollment for girls from less than 5 percent in 1990 to 30.8 percent in 2000.⁹ Gender parity for secondary school enrollment has also increased from the 1991 rate of .46 to the 2004 rate of .81 (United Nations Statistics Division 2006).

The PIF's secondary objective is to achieve gender equity at the post-primary level (Malawi SDNP 2001). The government of Malawi has mainly pursued this goal at the secondary level through programs that address the quality of education and infrastructure.¹⁰ Additionally, in 2001 the Ministry of Education instituted a national bursary scheme for implementation at the district level. Through this program, bursary committees, made up of the headmaster, two teachers, and parent-teacher association or school committee members, apply on behalf of needy students.¹¹ Originally, the Ministry of Education reserved 80

percent of bursary awards for girls, with the intention of distributing future awards evenly between boys and girls (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology 2001).

Civil society in Malawi works for gender parity by advocating for policies that support girls and by partnering with the government to promote education research and project implementation. The Civil Society Coalition for Quality Basic Education (CSCQBE) includes local and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) as well as district networks of community service organizations throughout Malawi; it focuses on primary education as well as some issues that span the education sector. The CSCQBE currently monitors education spending and advocates for quality education and access to education for girls and boys.¹²

The Need for a Campaign for Girls' Secondary Education

The impact of current policy and programming on secondary enrollment is limited by the large number of girls who cannot afford secondary school at any cost and may actually be contributing to the trend of increasing inequality at the secondary school level.¹³ Projects to build schools and improve quality make education more accessible and attractive to those who can pay school and related fees. In Malawi, however, the majority of girls still cannot afford the cost of tuition, room and board, uniforms, and exam and other related fees, given that tuition at government schools is often higher than the GDP per capita of \$156.¹⁴ Additional measures are urgently required to reach gender parity and to help poor girls to attend and graduate from secondary school.

The bursary program does not sufficiently address students' needs at the secondary level, as few rural Malawians and district-level employees are aware of the program and the requirements of the application process. Civil society reports that primary school graduates

have scant opportunities to continue their education at the secondary level and that bursary funding is extremely limited and varies by district. Communities are not aware that their children could access funding for secondary school, and district-level authorities may not be empowered to apply for funds on behalf of children in their community. Even when communities know how to nominate students, the current timeline often leaves an insufficient grace period for students who have been accepted to secondary schools to apply and secure funding before the start of the school year.¹⁵ The amount of available funds for bursaries is modest, yet funds go unused because of lack of awareness regarding the program.¹⁶

The need to invest in secondary school girls in Malawi is acute, especially since the recent gains in girls' primary education provide a platform for further progress. The international community has given a great deal of assistance to Malawi to help educate girls and boys, but the focus is on primary education. During the five-year period leading to 2004, of the \$328 million that donors gave for education, 76 percent was allocated to primary education (World Bank 2005b).

Beneficiaries from primary school-support programs struggle to find assistance to continue their education. For instance, USAID is currently funding the Ambassador Girls Scholarship Program (AGSP), which will give monetary and material support to 3,307 orphaned, vulnerable, and HIV/AIDS-affected girls in Malawi so that they can attend primary school.¹⁷ In 2005, forty-eight students from the AGSP program graduated from eighth grade upon completion of the Primary School Leaving Certificate Examination (PSLCE). In 2006 and 2007 combined, 988 girls are projected to take the exam. When girls

graduate from AGSP upon completion of Standard 8 and the PSLCE, there is no program to help them continue in school.¹⁸

Malawi's focus on the primary education system may have come at the cost of investments in the post-primary sectors. The share of primary education in total public education expenditure increased dramatically in the 1990s, and, as a result, almost all other areas of the education sector received less funding. In Fiscal Year 1990/1, one-quarter of total education expenditure was spent on primary education. By Fiscal Year 2000/1, this share increased to 59 percent, while funding for secondary education decreased from approximately 30 percent to 10 percent in the same period. Furthermore, the increased numbers of children graduating from primary school led to even greater pressure on the overstretched secondary school system.¹⁹

Although a primary school certificate was once sufficient, girls now need a secondary school degree in order to enter the formal workforce. Civil society leaders note this change and stress that girls need continuing support in order to break out of poverty. Girls graduating from primary school tend to be 14, 15, or 16 years old, and without support to continue their schooling, they are likely to fall pregnant or marry. According to Ester Msowoya, the coordinator of the Forum for African Women Educators in Malawi, "When a girl reaches Standard 8, we haven't helped that girl. We want the girl to complete the education cycle to finish high school. Once the girl has reached Form 4 she can get a job. At Standard 8 she will just get married." Zikani Kaunga, executive director of the Creative Centre for Community Mobilisation, the NGO which implements the AGSP, notes that of the forty-eight girls who passed their primary school exams in August 2005, eight had fallen pregnant by October. Kaunga further explains what happens to girls with no further

support: “In the worst situation, some of them go into prostitution, and they are prone to HIV/AIDS. Some of them try to find ways of getting resources, so they will go and get themselves involved in something that is detrimental to their health.”

Access to the secondary education system in Malawi is a bottleneck through which girls cannot easily pass. Each year, in addition to the many girls that drop out of school, approximately 20 percent of girls that pass their primary school exams fail to return to secondary school (UNESCO 2003/2004). At the tertiary level, girls are grossly underrepresented. Girls comprise only 35 percent of primary teacher training classes and 26 percent of the total number of students in tertiary education (Nellemann 2004).

The Benefits of Investing in Girls’ Secondary Education

Malawi can reap a great return on its investment in primary education through further investment in secondary school students, especially in girls. Both individual girls and entire classes of primary girls are the direct and indirect recipients of national and international support. These children have overcome formidable challenges and are excellent candidates for further investment. Giving girls an opportunity to continue their education at the secondary level can contribute to Malawi’s economic growth and productivity and to health-related objectives, including the fight against HIV/AIDS.

Research shows that educating girls beyond primary education further reduces the incidence of HIV/AIDS infection, lowers the rate of early pregnancy, and promotes well-nourished families.²⁰ In Malawi, secondary education includes coverage of HIV/AIDS prevention, gender issues, and human rights and provides girls with an additional opportunity to learn about the best way to protect themselves and stand up for their rights (US Peace Corps 2000). With greater levels of education, girls have a higher earning

potential and are more likely to become active participants in civil society. Education also increases a woman's influence within her own household and her ability to control how many children to have and how household income is spent (Grown, Gupta, and Kes 2005).

Attending secondary school has a positive impact on a girl's ability to care for her future children. Improved female secondary school enrollment rates reduce child underweight rates and are correlated with lower infant mortality rates (Smith and Haddad 2006, p. 1-4, World Bank 2005a p. 22). Furthermore, educated girls are more likely to teach their children what they have learned and to send their children to school (Grown, Gupta, and Kes 2005, Chapter 3).

While girls with a primary education are slightly less likely to be married, have sex, and have a child by age 20 than uneducated girls, secondary education for girls has a tremendous impact on the prevalence of these activities. The Academy for Educational Development reports that if a girl has no education in Malawi, there is an 87 percent chance that she will be married by age 20, a 90 percent chance that she will have had sex by age 20, and a 70 percent chance that she will have had a child by age 20. With primary education, girls' risk in these categories declines by only one to six percentage points. These trends are dramatically different for girls at the secondary level: with secondary education, girls' risk declines by twenty-eight to fifty-eight percentage points (see Figure 1).

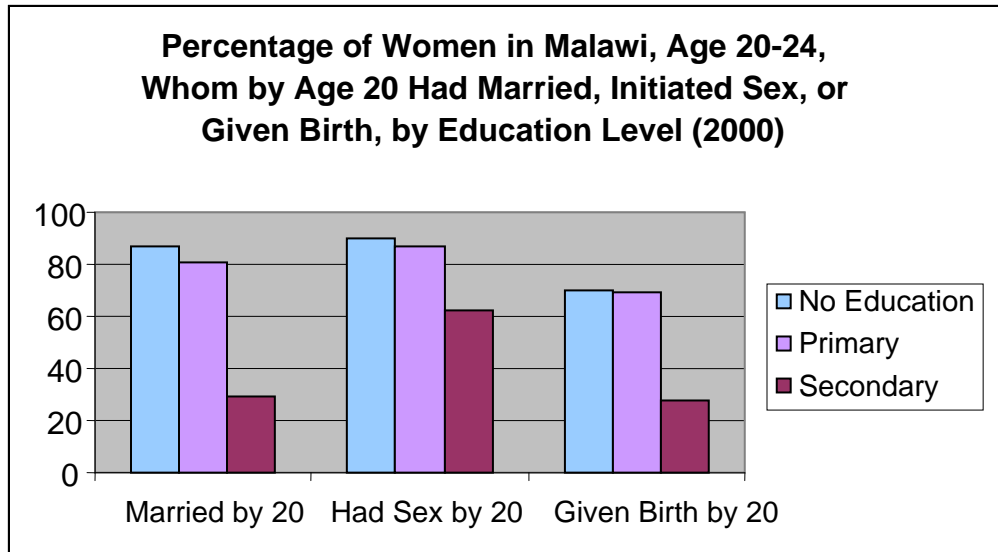


Figure 1. Source: Rihani 2006, p. 50.

Investing in secondary school has the potential to increase commitment to primary school graduation. Currently, only 57 percent of girls that enroll in primary school in Malawi continue to start their fifth year, and far fewer graduate from primary school (UNESCO 2003/2004). If girls and their parents believed that girls would have the opportunity to continue their education at the post-primary level, they would have a much greater incentive to invest in the full eight years of primary school. Furthermore, increasing the number of girls' secondary school graduates creates a larger cohort of potential teachers who can serve as role models for younger girls.

Research indicates that Malawian girls who graduate from secondary school will have opportunities for further education and employment. A study of secondary school graduates in Malawi found that only 10 percent of the class of 1995 was unemployed in 2003, indicating that secondary school students have a reasonable chance of finding employment.²¹ If girls graduate from secondary school, they will be positioned to apply for scholarships or loans for tertiary schools or vocational training centers.²² If the government implements

measures to increase efficiency, the tertiary system could have the capacity to accept some of the additional students that increased female participation would produce.²³

Promoting girls' secondary education can help to improve the social and economic situation in Malawi. Girls who are educated have a higher earning potential and tend to raise healthier, smaller families that will create less strain on the public health system. Increasing the share of women with secondary education by one percentage point can boost the annual per capita income growth by 0.3 percent on average (Dollar and Gatti 1999, Rihani 2006) and will help to prepare a cadre of women that can fill vacancies in the professional sphere caused by poverty and brain drain.

A Three-Pronged Action Plan to Make Girls' Education Safe and Affordable

In order to bring policy and programming in line with the PIF's objective of gender parity at the secondary level, this article recommends that the CSCQBE and the Ministries of Education and Women and Child Development jointly write an action plan for a three-pronged campaign to make secondary school affordable and safe for girls. This action plan should detail steps and implementers for three mutually reinforcing components:

1. Revamping the bursary scheme
2. Promoting and partnering in the provision of secondary school scholarships for girls
3. Implementing a multifaceted gender-responsive initiative to improve the experience of secondary school girls

In order to find funding, civil society and the relevant ministries are encouraged to present the action plan to major donors involved in education in Malawi, including the

British, Japanese, and Canadian bilateral development agencies, and to advocate for a larger share of the overall government budget for education. The proposed measures should be complementary to, not in place of, ongoing efforts at the primary and secondary school levels.

Prong 1: Revamp the Bursary Scheme

The first prong of the proposed approach addresses the inability of the current bursary scheme to meet the government's stated goal of making secondary education affordable for disadvantaged girls and boys. A joint review of the program by the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Women and Child Development, and members of the CSCQBE should lead to an action plan for improving the program.²⁴ Civil society and the ministries should review the bursary scheme, determining the level of need among qualified boys and girls for the bursary program as well as the level of funding that would be required to meet demand. The parties should study the percentage and profile of applicants that currently receive adequate funding and any factors that preclude needy students from applying for and receiving funding, such as limited community and district-level knowledge regarding the program. Potential avenues for an action plan include the following measures:

- Training district authorities regarding application procedures and responsibilities
- Streamlining and clarification of any confusing or cumbersome procedures and criteria
- Mobilizing communities, teachers, students, parent-teacher associations, and/or school committees to monitor bursary committees for fair and consistent awards

- Providing female applicants with some preference, taking into account their underrepresentation at the secondary level
- Defining and publicizing criteria and awards to ensure that bursary funds are allocated only to students who could not otherwise afford secondary school
- Making sure award and funding information is available to civil society to increase the transparency of the bursary program

Prong 2: Promote Secondary School Scholarships for Girls

The second prong of the proposed campaign urges the government and civil society to promote partnerships with donors to provide scholarships for disadvantaged, yet high-achieving, girls in furtherance of the PIF objective of gender parity at the post-primary level. If the government and civil society jointly advocate for scholarships, international donors and private contributors to NGOs may be encouraged to invest in this activity. A government and civil society campaign to promote scholarships should include consideration of the following points:

- Donors should seek opportunities to expand the capacity of local partners. Local implementing agencies are convinced of the need for secondary school scholarships but in many cases are stretched beyond their capacity by urgent needs in the primary subsector.
- Empowering strategies such as assertiveness training and reproductive health classes will greatly increase the impact of scholarship programs by helping girls to protect themselves.

- Girls can be brought into the development process as mentors for younger girls and through training that helps girls to understand their potential as community leaders and philanthropists.
- Working with communities is critical for confronting negative attitudes about girls' academic and professional potential. Local NGOs' participatory methodologies, such as theater groups that act out scenarios related to HIV/AIDS and gender, should form the basis of scholarship programs' community-based components.
- Programs in Malawi that sponsor individuals should consider sending scholars to private schools, in line with the recommended objective of growing the private education sector.²⁵ Enrolling girls in private school will avoid further overburdening public schools and will promote the growth of private sector provision of secondary education. Meanwhile, large-scale projects in the secondary school sector should continue to expand and equip the public school system.

NGOs and multilateral donors have begun to experiment with secondary school scholarship programs and therefore appear open to programming along these lines. The USAID-funded Ambassador Girls' Scholarship Program provides secondary education scholarships in many African countries, including Zambia and Kenya, but only targets the primary education sector in Malawi (USAID 2006, US Embassy in Kenya 2005).²⁶ A USAID-funded project implemented by CARE in Sudan supports girls' secondary school fees, addressing the extreme disparity between girls' and boys' enrollment.²⁷ The World Bank is implementing a groundbreaking secondary school program in Bangladesh that includes a component for girls' scholarships. This program has enabled Bangladesh to meet the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of gender parity ahead of 2015 and has become

a model for other countries. These programs show the potential interest in secondary education among public donors.

The past decade has seen a surge of NGOs and foundations that are investing in secondary school scholarships and in girls throughout Africa, recognizing the gap in current funding flows for secondary education and the additional challenges that girls face. Recent experience with the media and US-based fundraising among private donors shows that Americans are eager to learn about Africa, to help girls continue their education, and to give through programs that promote a feeling of connectedness with scholars. Many of these organizations have noted the need for secondary school scholarships and could potentially be galvanized by a noted commitment from the Malawian government and civil society.²⁸

Prong 3: Implement a Multifaceted Gender-Responsive Initiative

The third prong of the action plan should detail a gender-responsive social mobilization initiative to make secondary education a more attractive, safe, and viable option for girls and their families. The action plan elaborated jointly by the CSCQBE and the Ministries of Education and Child Development should aim to improve the quality of secondary education for girls, girls' access to secondary school, and girls' ability to confront the obstacles to education. The Social Mobilization Campaign model, which was developed for the Girls' Attainment in Basic Literacy and Education project implemented locally by the Creative Centre for Community Mobilisation in 1994, serves as a perfect framework for an intervention in the secondary education sector similar to past efforts in the primary sector.²⁹ The action plan should assess and prioritize issues in the secondary sector and should consider making the following recommendations, which are organized into four categories:

Promoting Clear Roles, Transparency, and Policy for Gender Parity:

- Promoting clear understanding about the distinct roles of the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Women and Child Development will promote effective partnerships and program implementation.
- Transparent procedures regarding the use of funds for education programs will allow civil society to actively monitor and participate in education programming.
- Training school authorities to understand gender-related policies, such as the policy that 50 percent of secondary school spaces should be reserved for girls, can help to bring implementation in line with policy objectives.

Combating Negative Attitudes about Girls:

- Utilizing participatory methodologies can help communities to understand the challenges that girls face and to dispel the notion that girls are not as able as boys. By discussing how girls' responsibilities create unequal challenges, communities can begin to think of more equitable solutions.
- Sensitizing communities can help to refute the notion that once a girl is pregnant she cannot return to school and to promote understanding for a young mother's right to education.³⁰
- Ongoing initiatives to encourage girls, such as community-based mentoring programs and the Ministry of Women and Child Development's Role Modeling program, should be scaled up to reach more girls and more rural communities.

Combating Sexual Abuse:

- Sensitizing communities, parent-teacher associations, student associations, and school committees to the issue of sexual abuse in schools, in transit, and in the community can mobilize local resources to confront this hindrance to girls' secondary education. These groups can monitor teachers' behavior, listen to students' complaints, and provide support in the event of sexual abuse.
- Promoting female teachers can provide girls with a more comfortable way to report abuse.
- Building full-service boarding schools provides a safer environment for girls than self-boarding facilities, and community involvement in monitoring both full-boarding facilities and self-boarding facilities could help to reduce girls' exposure.
- Providing girls with training in assertiveness and life skills can help girls to stand up for themselves and to ward off unwanted advances.

Promoting Quality Education:

- Mobilizing communities can lead to better quality education as communities can be trained to monitor and assess school performance.
- Community members can be encouraged and trained to start initiatives or petition local authorities and/or NGOs for infrastructure that creates a gender-sensitive environment, such as boarding facilities, sanitary facilities, and living quarters for female teachers.

Based on feedback from communities, civil society and the relevant ministries could consider further programs to support girls' secondary education, such as scholarships to promote female teachers or incentives for female teachers. Other interventions to support young mothers could include promotion of village schools, accelerated learning programs with flexible hours, and/or day care centers that communities jointly support.

Further Challenges

The recommendations elaborated here will contribute to a safe and affordable secondary school environment for girls in Malawi, but girls will continue to face challenges while in secondary school. There is a shortage of qualified teachers in Malawi, and this will affect girls and boys in almost all learning environments. Abuse is widespread throughout Malawi, and not all girls will be protected by the recommended measures. Both public and private schools in Malawi vary in quality significantly, which creates challenges for scholarship programs and for all girls. Upon graduation from secondary school, boys and girls will continue to face challenges in the labor market and will struggle to finance their continuing education, although, in theory, loans and grants will be available to them to some degree. These challenges should not be cited to argue against scholarships. Disadvantaged, high-achieving girls need secondary education to compete in their local markets and in the increasingly global economy.

Implications for Africa

In many countries of Africa, international funding and national attention has focused first on primary education and second on increasing access to secondary school, but rarely on making secondary education affordable for girls. Great progress has been made toward the second Millennium Development Goal, but less progress has been made toward the

