



SNAPSHOT Stella Stays in School

Girls get extra help to overcome obstacles in their education.



USAID Photo

Stella reading in front of her class



Like many girls in Malawi, little Stella Chibonga did not feel safe at school. She hadn't yet mastered the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic; she performed far below grade level. She had trouble keeping up with the curriculum. Her Standard (Grade) I teacher, Melia Swaleyi, said that other children laughed at her because when she tried to write she “held her pencil with five fingers as if she was holding a fresh tilapia fish from the Shire River. She could hardly recognize the letters she was trying to write!”

Instead of being inspired in the classroom, Stella floundered, often finding reasons to stay at home. Unfortunately and inevitably, the more often she stayed home, the further behind she fell.

Finally, on one of the rare occasions that Stella did go to school, Mrs. Swaleyi asked her to stay after class with some of her fellow students who needed extra help in reading. Using the techniques she had learned through the USAID/Malawi Early Grade Reading Activity (EGRA), Mrs Swaleyi started to teach Stella letter sounds. In that single afternoon, Stella’s experience of school changed from one of bewilderment to one of possibility.

Stella came to school the next day and the day after, staying after class to continue learning the building blocks of reading as prescribed through the teacher training and scripted lesson plans that Mrs. Swaleyi received through the EGRA. Stella learned how to hold a pencil and how to sound out words. Today, Stella’s absenteeism is a thing of the past and she has begun to decode words and comprehend what she is reading. She is even a reading group leader in her class.

Mrs. Swaleyi is grateful to USAID and the EGRA in helping her learn effective methodologies for teaching her students how to read. “Before the EGRA, our Standard I students were not reading, even at the end of the year. Now there are many students in my class who are reading just like Stella--and we are barely half-way through the school year.”

Stella’s initial dilemma is not an isolated case. In Malawi’s education system, girls are less likely to access or remain in school. In fact, although boys and girls begin school at the same skill level, by the end of primary school a 10-percentage gap emerges between the sexes in the Primary School Leaving Certificate exam results, implying that girls gradually underachieve in the upper grades. Ignoring gender

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inequality has serious consequences: girls' education is linked to having fewer children and therefore slower population growth. Education also empowers communities to combat gender-based violence and other forms of discrimination against women and girls. Programs like the EGRA can help to stem this inequality by keeping girls like Stella in school.

The USAID/Malawi Early Grade Reading Activity is a three-year, \$24-million activity implemented by RTI International. It focuses on the promotion of quality early grade reading instruction, the production of high quality reading and learning materials in Chichewa and English, an improved policy environment for reading at the national and local levels, and the building of a community of reading within and outside the school setting. A simultaneous impact evaluation is measuring the impact of this intervention and how household factors and other USAID/Malawi activities affect reading scores in treatment schools.