



**BROKEN  
CHALK**

Submission to the Universal Periodic Review of the United  
Nations Human Rights Council 4<sup>th</sup> Cycle – 50<sup>th</sup> Session

## **Right to Education**

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### **Country Review: Malawi**

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**Submitting Organization: BROKEN CHALK**

**April 2025**

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**Broken Chalk** is an Amsterdam-based NGO established in 2020 that monitors and minimises worldwide human rights violations in education. We aim to promote universal and equal access to education for all.

We encourage and support achieving societal peace with our international sponsors and partners by advocating for intercultural tolerance, preventing radicalism and polarisation, and tackling educational inequalities.

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## I. Introduction

1. The following report has been drafted by Broken Chalk as a stakeholder contribution to the fourth cycle of the Universal Periodic Review [UPR] for Malawi. Broken Chalk's main objective is to combat educational human rights violations, and the contents of this report and its recommendations will primarily focus on the Right to Education.
2. Malawi is a landlocked country located in Southeast Africa. Its economy is primarily based on agriculture, with tobacco being the main cash crop. Despite its small size, Malawi is rich in natural resources, including forests, wildlife, and minerals. However, the country faces several challenges, including poverty, food insecurity, inadequate infrastructure, and limited access to quality education.
3. According to the Education Act and the Constitution of Malawi, primary education in Government schools shall be free of tuition and available to all. Education is compulsory for every child below eighteen years of age.<sup>i</sup>
4. However, the reality is different. According to UNESCO, Malawi has a total of 4.5 million pupils enrolled in primary and secondary education. About 3.7 million (83%) of these pupils are enrolled in primary education. An estimated 11% of primary-age children are out of school, with poorer children most likely to fall into this category.<sup>ii</sup>
5. Based on the educational attainment of 15 – 24-year-olds in 2010, 5% received no education at all, 57% failed to complete primary school, 19% attended secondary school but failed to complete their secondary education, 7% completed secondary education, and 1% studied beyond secondary level.<sup>iii</sup>
6. The illiteracy rate is higher among women in Malawi, with about 34.1% of females being illiterate compared to 28.4% of males. In rural areas, female illiteracy can reach as high as 35.2%.<sup>iv</sup>
7. UNESCO estimates that learning poverty—defined as the proportion of children unable to read and understand an age-appropriate text by age 10—is alarmingly high across sub-Saharan Africa, with estimates around 89%.<sup>v</sup>
8. Additionally, among those who transition to secondary education, only about 54% pass the Malawi School Certificate of Education (MSCE) examinations, which is an extremely low pass rate.<sup>vi</sup>
9. The report will evaluate the challenges and commitments made by Malawi in the 3<sup>rd</sup> cycle and provide recommendations based on primary and secondary research, including a qualitative interview.

## II. Brief overview of the last UN-UPR cycle

10. In the last cycle, Malawi received 232 recommendations, 186 were supported, and 45 were noted but not accepted. The country received several recommendations regarding education and the rights of children, which they said.<sup>vii</sup>
11. The issue of inadequate school infrastructure was highlighted continuously, and the country accepted recommendations to build more schools; however, private projects like Secondary Education Expansion for Development (SEED) have been building schools in the country,<sup>viii</sup> and there are no reports of government projects that have sailed off the ground since the last cycle.
12. Another recommendation from the last cycle was to increase the number of qualified teachers due to the insufficient numbers and high pupil-to-teacher ratios, as well as inadequate teacher recruitment. In January 2024, President Lazarus Chakwera announced plans to recruit 5,000 new secondary school teachers to improve the pupil-to-teacher ratio and address

staffing shortages. This is part of a broader strategy to increase the teaching workforce by 50%, adding 13,000 teachers.<sup>ix</sup>

13. Regarding teachers, a disparity was noted among female teachers; as of 2023, female teachers accounted for approximately 45.87% of primary education teachers in Malawi, which is a positive increase and improvement.<sup>x</sup>
14. Another issue was the difference in completion rates between boys and girls, which varied by economic status and location.
15. Despite having free education, an issue of hidden fees, such as "development fees," adds financial barriers for students, and this issue persists despite the government's efforts to address it.
16. The dropout rates in Malawi remain critically high, particularly in primary education. Reports indicate that only 41% of students complete their primary education through Standard 8. This low completion rate is exacerbated by high repetition and significant dropout rates, particularly among girls.<sup>xi</sup>

### III. Poor infrastructure

17. Due to a lack of funding and the country's economic problems, Malawi faces significant infrastructure issues. Not only does the government have poor infrastructure buildings, but it also struggles with the number of classes.<sup>xii</sup>
18. According to the interviewees, the issue of overcrowding in rural schools has led to some students dropping out because they are unable to learn effectively at school.<sup>xiii</sup>
19. Another issue raised by both interviewees was the poor hygiene in rural schools due to a lack of proper infrastructure for learners. It was clear that schools in cities and towns have better facilities, mainly due to the involvement of private organisations and parental support. However, those in rural areas face issues with a lack of toilets, clean water, and buildings.<sup>xiv</sup>
20. The above assertion is validated by the data collected by Gift of Givers; according to the organisation, only 23% of schools in Malawi have sanitation facilities, and only 19% have access to hand-washing facilities.<sup>xv</sup> This is an unacceptable problem in a country that is malaria-prone. Every child has a right to basic sanitation, and the country continues to fail to meet the needs of schools.
21. In addition to poor conditions at schools, Malawi also faces a shortage of adequately equipped schools, with most schools in rural areas lacking laboratories for STEM subjects. According to our first interviewee, even when there are laboratories, many schools face issues with resources, such as chemicals for science experiments or necessary equipment, including beakers and seedlings, for practical subjects.<sup>xvi</sup>
22. Furthermore, the issue of poor evaluation of buildings by the government was mentioned. When the government builds schools, the buildings are often subpar and not adequately evaluated by the relevant channels to ensure safety for the children. Additionally, some buildings have never been assessed since their construction and pose a danger to the students.<sup>xvii</sup>

### IV. Low Completion Rates

23. According to our qualitative interviews, many primary school students drop out because schools are not conducive. Although some schools are free, students still need to pay specific administrative fees, which can be burdensome for them.<sup>xviii</sup>

24. According to the teacher interviewee, some students receive a temporary suspension and/or are detained in an unacademic classroom until they have paid the administrative fees, which results in the disruption of education, causes psychological harm to some students, and encourages bullying at schools. <sup>xix</sup>
25. Some parents decide to unenroll their children due to the unhealthy and toxic environments at school, with reports of extreme corporal punishment by teachers at school, which was brought up in our interview. <sup>xx</sup>
26. Corporal punishment is unlawful in schools under Article 19 of the Constitution, which prohibits corporal punishment “in connection with any judicial proceedings or any other proceedings before any organ of the state”. It is unclear whether the prohibition applies to private schools. Following a review of the Education Act 1962 in 2009, the Government recommended that the revised Act include the explicit prohibition of corporal punishment. However, the Education Act 2012 is silent on the issue of corporal punishment. <sup>xxi</sup>
27. According to our interviewees, despite the law, many teachers still engage in corporal punishment, especially for primary school students, or take measures that would not be considered corporal punishment yet still extremely harsh, like running a significant number of laps, doing agricultural projects for students in rural areas, and extreme exercises. <sup>xxii</sup>
28. According to our interviewee, all these factors make schools undesirable for some students, with rural students opting to skip school and eventually drop out, which is not monitored, the interviewee noted. <sup>xxiii</sup>
29. In addition, child abuse goes unreported by teachers and at home, which leads to poor performance and school dropout in high school and upper primary school students. According to our interviewee, many children suffer from some form of child abuse at home and school, ranging from neglect to physical and sexual abuse. Still, the community and the government do not prioritise the social workers’ budget and education tracks. <sup>xxiv</sup>
30. Furthermore, poverty is a significant social issue in Malawi. Schools in Malawi do not offer any food packages, and some rural schools operate until 4 pm, leading many children to spend entire days without food. It is more feasible for confident parents to take children out of school.
31. Another issue with regards to dropouts and low enrolment that arose in the interviews was that of teen pregnancies and family responsibilities; Malawi, like the countries around it, has significant issues with teen pregnancies and failure by the government to have in place adequate education accommodations for individuals who need to study at home due to pregnancy or other reasons. In addition, high school boys drop out because of a lack of financial support and the need to work to provide for their families, and the Malawian government does not have proper reports in place to support children who are affected. <sup>xxv</sup>

## V. Teacher shortages and qualifications.

32. Another significant issue is the shortage of teachers, which can be broadly divided into two parts: Malawi has a substantial shortage of teachers, and additionally, many teachers employ rote methods of teaching and lack proper qualifications due to the low requirements.
33. Teachers have classrooms of up to 150 students, resulting in poor educational quality. <sup>xxvi</sup>
34. According to our second interviewee, a public-school teacher and parent, many schools in rural areas face budget constraints that broadly impact education quality, with many students facing education poverty as a result; this lack of resources also leads to many children who require

exemptions to fall through the cracks as teachers and schools are not equipped with resources to support and quickly identify these students.<sup>xxvii</sup>

35. According to UNESCO, Malawi doesn't have a Teaching Service Commission (TSC), an organisation that manages teachers and improves their professional status and well-being.<sup>xxviii</sup> This supports the claims of teachers' misconduct and the poor quality of lessons delivered.
36. In Malawi, the lack of policy guidance on career paths for teachers is perceived as contributing to the attrition of teachers to other professions.<sup>xxix</sup> Many teachers leave for more lucrative careers or migrate from the country due to the country's poor wages and inflation, as highlighted in the interview. This results in many teachers offering exorbitant extra-curricular lessons and providing subpar lessons in classes, which puts poor students at a disadvantage, a point supported by the first interviewee.<sup>xxx</sup>
37. Additionally, another issue of a lack of training to handle children with disabilities was raised. Additionally, gender disparities continue to persist, and according to our interviewee, a teacher, the workplace is toxic for female teachers. Gender bias continues to persist in the Malawian education system.<sup>xxxi</sup>

## VI. Recommendations

38. To address these issues, Malawi needs to significantly increase investment in school infrastructure, prioritising rural areas and ensuring regular safety evaluations of all school buildings. Additionally, partnerships with private organisations and increased community involvement could help bridge the resource gap between urban and rural schools.
39. Broken Chalk recommends that the Malawian government develop a fair financial transfer formula that considers the poverty index, the school-aged population, and enrolment rates. This will ensure equitable resource distribution across all regions, addressing the disparities between urban and rural schools and promoting fairness in educational opportunities.
40. Broken Chalk commends the Malawian government's efforts but urges a progressive increase in the percentage of the national budget allocated to education, we recommend the government to aim to reach and maintain at least 20% of total expenditure for education to guarantee sufficient resources for quality teaching, learning materials, and infrastructure development.
41. Broken Chalk recommends targeted initiatives to provide all students with access to clean water, hygienic toilets, and hand-washing stations, particularly in rural and under-resourced areas. We encourage regular maintenance of sanitation facilities to ensure long-term sustainability and continued access.
42. Broken Chalk recommends implementing targeted initiatives to provide all students with access to clean water, hygienic toilets, and hand-washing stations, particularly in rural and under-resourced areas. To improve teacher recruitment, deployment, and professional development, Broken Chalk recommends establishing a Teaching Service Commission (TSC). This body would ensure that all teachers receive adequate training and support, contributing to higher retention rates and overall improvements in education quality.
43. We further recommend establishing a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation system to track student attendance, dropout rates, and academic performance. This would enable timely interventions to prevent students from dropping out of school and inform policy adjustments to enhance learning outcomes. Addressing child abuse within the education system must be a national priority.

44. Broken Chalk calls for the implementation of training programmes to help teachers identify and report cases of abuse. Additionally, the number of social workers assigned to schools should be increased to provide adequate support for vulnerable students.
45. Finally, Broken Chalk urges the streamlining and strengthening of decentralised education management. This would enhance coordination between national and local authorities, ensuring the effective implementation of education policies and programmes. Particular attention should be given to rural communities, where access to and quality of education remain significant challenges.

<sup>i</sup> Government of Malawi, *The Constitution of the Republic of Malawi*, 1994, accessed November 20, 2024, <https://malawilii.org/mw/legislation/consolidated-act/constitution-republic-malawi>.

<sup>ii</sup> Ripple Africa. "Education in Malawi Africa." Accessed November 17, 2024. <https://rippleafricausa.org/project/education-in-malawi-africa/>

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid

<sup>iv</sup> DVV International. "The Painful Hefty Price for Illiteracy." Accessed November 20, 2024. <https://www.dvv-international.mw/malawi/news/article/the-painful-hefty-price-for-illiteracy>

<sup>v</sup> UNESCO IICBA. "Malawi." Accessed November 10, 2024. <https://www.iicba.unesco.org/en/malawi>

<sup>vi</sup> USAID. "Education Fact Sheet 2021." Accessed November 15, 2024.

<https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/2022-05/Education-Fact-Sheet-2021.pdf>

<sup>vii</sup> United Nations Malawi. "Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) Malawi." February 2021. <https://malawi.un.org/en/122906-report-working-group-universal-periodic-review-upr-malawi-feb-2021>

<sup>viii</sup> USAID. "Malawi Secondary Education Expansion." Accessed November 17, 2024.

<https://www.usaid.gov/infrastructure/results/malawi-secondary-education-expansion>

<sup>ix</sup> Voice of America. "US Delivers 66 Schools for Students in Rural Malawi." Accessed November 18, 2024.

<https://www.voanews.com/a/us-delivers-66-schools-for-students-in-rural-malawi/7463707.html>

<sup>x</sup> Trading Economics. "Malawi - Primary Education Teachers (% Female)." Accessed November 19, 2024.

<https://tradingeconomics.com/malawi/primary-education-teachers-percent-female-wb-data.html>

<sup>xi</sup> UNICEF. "Malawi Factsheet 2022." Accessed November 20, 2024. [https://data.unicef.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/2022Malawi\\_Factsheet\\_InDesign-FINAL-2.pdf](https://data.unicef.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/2022Malawi_Factsheet_InDesign-FINAL-2.pdf)

[https://data.unicef.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/2022Malawi\\_Factsheet\\_InDesign-FINAL-2.pdf](https://data.unicef.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/2022Malawi_Factsheet_InDesign-FINAL-2.pdf)

<sup>xii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xiii</sup> Anonymous Interview Subject. Broken Chalk Interview The Gambia. Interview by Broken Chalk, November 20, 2024 and December 8th, 2024.

<sup>xiv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xv</sup> Gift of the Givers. "School Water Sanitation and Hygiene (School WASH)." Accessed November 21, 2024.

<https://giftofthegivers.org/education/school-water-sanitation-and-hygiene-school-wash/32767/>

<sup>xvi</sup> Anonymous Interview Subject. Broken Chalk Interview The Gambia. Interview by Broken Chalk, November 20, 2024

<sup>xvii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xviii</sup> Anonymous Interview Subject. Broken Chalk Interview The Gambia. Interview by Broken Chalk, November 20, 2024.

<sup>xix</sup> Anonymous Interview Subject. Broken Chalk Interview The Gambia. Interview by Broken Chalk, December 8th, 2024.

<sup>xx</sup> Anonymous Interview Subject. Broken Chalk Interview The Gambia. Interview by Broken Chalk, November December 8<sup>th</sup> 2024.

<sup>xxi</sup> Education Act 1962 in 2009

<sup>xxii</sup> Anonymous Interview Subject. Broken Chalk Interview The Gambia. Interview by Broken Chalk, November 20, 2024 and December 8<sup>th</sup> 2024.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Anonymous Interview Subject. Broken Chalk Interview The Gambia. Interview by Broken Chalk, November 20, 2024.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Ibid

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<sup>xxv</sup> Anonymous Interview Subject. Broken Chalk Interview The Gambia. Interview by Broken Chalk, December 8<sup>th</sup> 2024.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Malawi Nation. "Malawi Has 65,000 Teachers Deficit – Ministry." *MWNation*, December 15, 2022. <https://mwnation.com/malawi-has-65-000-teachers-deficit-ministry/>.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Anonymous Interview Subject. Broken Chalk Interview The Gambia. Interview by Broken Chalk, December 8<sup>th</sup>, 2024

<sup>xxviii</sup> UNESCO IICBA. "Malawi." Accessed November 16, 2024. <https://www.iicba.unesco.org/en/malawi>

<sup>xxix</sup> Global Partnership for Education. "Improving Teaching and Learning Knowledge and Innovation Exchange (KIX)." Accessed November 15, 2024. <https://www.gpekix.org/knowledge-repository/improving-teaching-and-learning-knowledge-and-innovation-exchange-kix>

<sup>xxx</sup> Anonymous Interview Subject. Broken Chalk Interview The Gambia. Interview by Broken Chalk, November 20, 2024

<sup>xxxi</sup> Anonymous Interview Subject. Broken Chalk Interview The Gambia. Interview by Broken Chalk, December 8<sup>th</sup>, 2024