



A Multi-Sector Response to EMP and Girls' Education Barriers in Rural and Farming Communities: Insights from a Rapid Gender Analysis

Introduction

The Girls Education Advocacy in the Region (GEAR) Alliance, a consortium of youth-focused organizations in Malawi, Zambia, and Zimbabwe is committed to advancing inclusive and equitable education systems for girls and young women in rural and farming communities. Through coordinated advocacy and shared learning, the Alliance seeks to strengthen national education systems, ensuring every girl can enroll, remain, and succeed in school and they can contribute to their economies growth, and poverty reduction.

This policy brief calls for an integrated, multi-sectoral responses to address barriers that undermine girls' education particularly **Early Marriage and teenage Pregnancy (EMP)**, which are both causes and consequences of systemic inequities. Drawing on insights from a Rapid Gender Analysis, the brief highlights the intersectoral nature of barriers to education and proposes actionable strategies that combine education, health, and social protection interventions to ensure that every girl has the opportunity to learn, thrive, and lead.

Problem Statement

Despite national efforts to promote inclusive education, girls in rural and farming communities continue to face entrenched barriers that undermine their ability to enroll, remain, and succeed in school. Driven by intersecting factors that reinforce each other, EMP emerge as the most pervasive and consequential barrier to girls' access to quality education. From climate shocks that displace schooling and health services coupled with digital exclusion that increases dependance on transactional relationships, and limited access to SRH education and services which limit agency, girls continue to be trapped in cycles of vulnerability and exclusion. Current responses to these intersecting drivers of EMP are siloed across sectors, leaving critical gaps. This fragmentation underscores the urgency of coordinated action to dismantle barriers and safeguard every girl's right to education.

Unpacking the Drivers of EMP: Evidence and Intersectional Risks

"In Eastern and Southern Africa, early marriage and early pregnancy are deeply intertwined drivers of girls' school dropout. Where girls marry early, adolescent pregnancy almost always follows and education is usually the first casualty." — UNICEF, 2025

Girls in rural and farming communities face barriers to education that may appear different on the surface but often result in the same outcome, EMP. Using a comparative regional lens, the Rapid Gender Analysis draws on evidence from neighboring countries to show that, regardless of the entry point be it economic stress, climate shocks and disruptions, digital exclusion, or limited access to sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services the most consistent "choke point" undermining girls' schooling is EMP. While these pressures vary by locality, their convergence in EMP accelerates school dropout, weakens retention and completion, and narrows opportunities for re entry. The evidence presented here is intended to inform nationally tailored action while underscoring the urgency for decisive leadership to disrupt these shared regional patterns.

Different risks converge into the same education outcome for girls.

Converging Driver	Malawi	Zambia	Zimbabwe	Why these matters for national leadership on girls' education
Early child marriage and teenage pregnancy	Over 1/3 of adolescent girls are married before 18 with rural girls most affected. Pre-marital pregnancy frequently precipitates marriage and permanent school exit	Nearly 1 in 3 adolescent girls are married before 18, rural adolescent pregnancy rates are more than twice urban levels, closely linked to school dropout.	Approx. 34% of girls marry before 18, child marriage and pregnancy remain the leading cause of drop-out and non-return to school in rural areas.	EMP is the most consistent bottleneck which directly interrupts schooling through dropout, stigma, care burdens, and reduced re-entry opportunities. Addressing EMP delivers immediate gains in enrolment, retention and completion
Climate and Economic shocks	Climate Vulnerability and rural poverty disrupt schooling and increase reliance on early marriage or relationships as coping strategies	The 2024 drought affected 5.4 million people, displaced education and livelihoods, increasing early marriage, transactional sex and pregnancy risk among rural girls	Food insecurity and livelihoods stress in rural districts are linked to spikes in teenage pregnancy and early unions in rural districts	Education systems are not climate-neutral, shocks accelerate girls exit from schools unless protection mechanisms are in place. Crisis- responsive education and protection systems are essential to prevent climate shocks from translating into EMP
Limited access to adolescent SRH information and services	Gaps in youth-friendly SRH services in rural areas limit girls' ability to prevent unintended pregnancy, accelerating dropout	Only 56% of adolescents demand for modern contraception is met, stigma and distance to services remain major barriers, and service access gaps fuels pregnancy-related school exit	Weak service reach and stigma persist, particularly for married or out-of-school girls, reinforcing permanent school exclusion	Linking education systems to SRH access is a high-impact, cross-sector leadership opportunity. Without SRH access education policies alone cannot prevent pregnancy-related dropout.
Digital exclusion and unsafe access to technology	Rural connectivity gaps limit access to learning and information, increasing vulnerability to EMP	Cost of data and devices and access barriers exclude rural girls from digital learning and SRH information, compounding drop out risks	Unequal and unsafe digital access increases exposure to exploitation while limiting education continuity	Digital expansion without gender safeguards risks accelerating – not reducing – education exclusion. Digital expansion must be gender-responsive or it risks widening educational and protection gaps.
Social norms and weak local enforcement	Despite strong laws, uneven enforcement allows early marriage to continue at community level	Harmful norms persist during crises, overriding statutory protections and education policies	Cultural and religious norms still supersede legal protections in some rural areas	National leadership is critical to align laws, enforcement and community accountability around girls' schooling. Norm change and community accountability are

The evidence makes clear that addressing EMP is the most strategic entry point for improving rural girls' access, retention and success in school. EMP does not emerge in isolation, it is the convergence point of interlocking risks shaped by poverty, climate-related and economic shocks, limited access to adolescent-responsive SRH services, digital exclusion, and entrenched social norms. Because these pressures reinforce one another, no single sector can effectively address them alone. Ensuring that girls can remain in school requires coordinated action across education, health, child protection, social protection, ICT and digital development, and environment and climate ministries, supported by strong community engagement and crisis-responsive programming. Strengthening this multisectoral alignment is essential for countries seeking to lead regional progress and break the pattern of exclusion that EMP creates for rural girls.

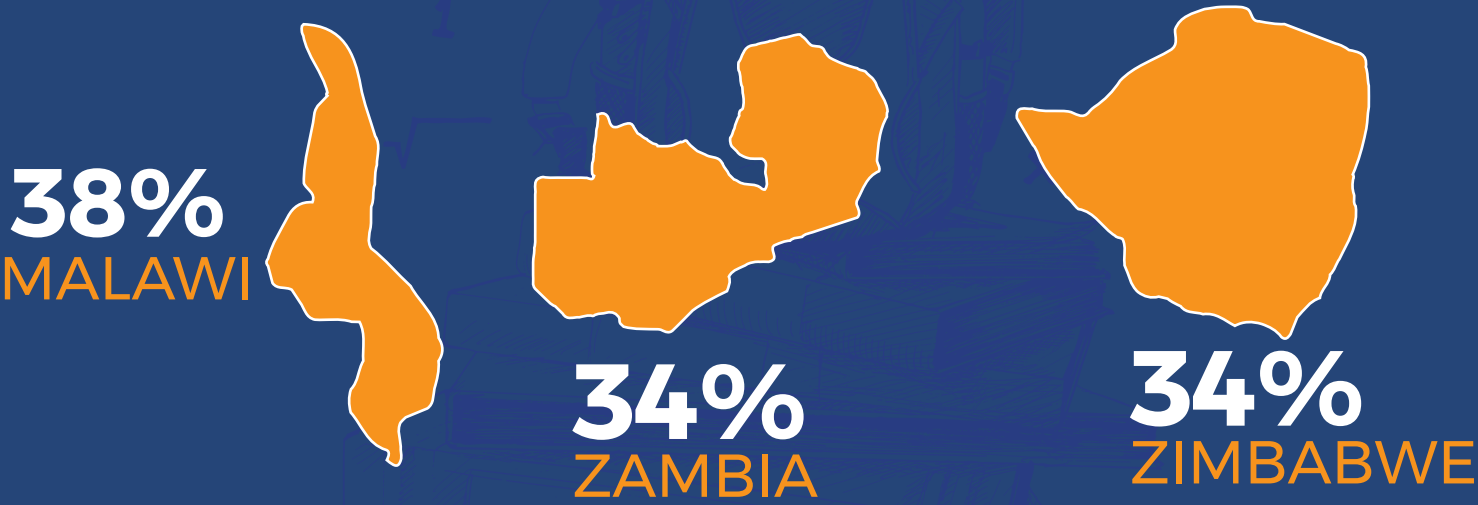
Policy Landscape: Strong Frameworks Undermined by Siloed Implementation

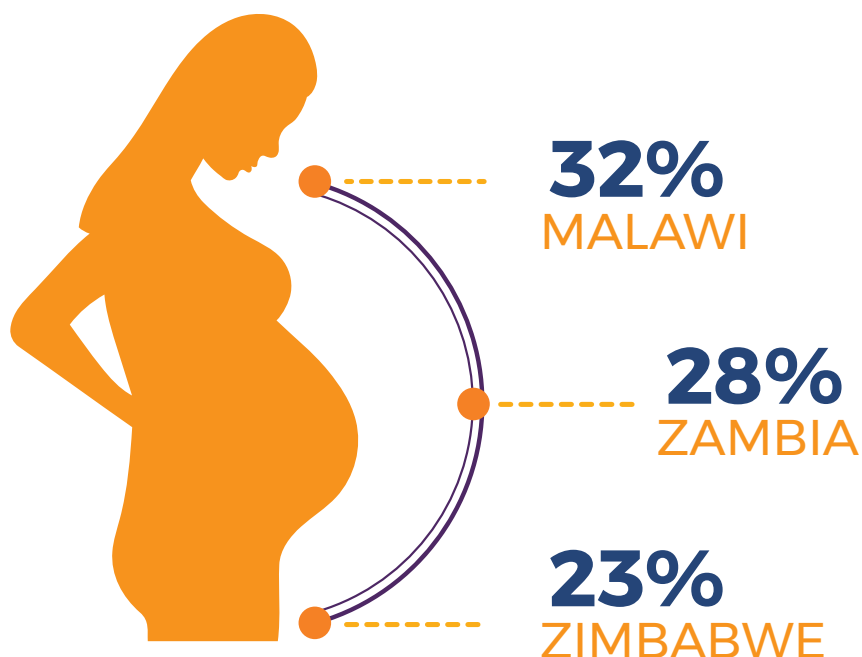
While comparing national contexts, we recognize that our government like others in the region have adopted strong legal and policy frameworks that protect children, guarantee education rights, expand access to adolescent SRH services, promote digital inclusion & safety, and strengthen climate resilience. Yet EMP persists because these frameworks are often implemented in parallel rather than delivered as one connected system around the girl most at risk.

Strong Frameworks Exist		
1) Minimum Age of Marriage + Legal/ Criminal Deterrence		
Malawi	Marriage, Divorce, Family Act (2015) (Chapter 25:01) + constitutional alignment (2017) sets min age and defines a child as under 18	Legal standards are clear and aligned to an “18+” rule; the remaining challenge is not the absence of law but weak prevention/enforcement chains at community level and limited cross-sector systems that stop EMP risk before marriage/pregnancy occurs
Zambia	Marriage (Amendment) Act, 2023 raises min marriageable age to 18 for all marriages including customary	
Zimbabwe	Marriage Act, 2022 (Chapter 5:15) sets 18 as the min age of marriage and criminalizes facilitating/allowing/abetting child marriage	
2) Education Protection + re-entry / continuation		
Malawi	Readmission policy for Primary and Secondary Schools (Revised 2018) reaffirms re-admission of learners affected by pregnancy	Education frameworks increasingly support retention and re-entry, but education alone cannot “outrun” EMP unless linked to SRH access, case management, and household shock support.
Zambia	Education Act, (Act 23 of 2011) provides right to education, compulsory attendance, includes re-admission of learners also contains provisions on gender equity and learner protection	
Zimbabwe	Education Act (Chapter 24:04) + Education (General) Regulations, 2025 (S.I. 13 of 2025) establishes children right to education and the governance of schooling (foundation for retention and access protections) including pregnancy provisions and disability inclusion.	
3) Adolescent SRH Policy architecture (prevention and services)		
Malawi	National Youth Friendly Health Services Strategy (2022 – 2030) guides youth friendly pathways for adolescents and young people, including SRH service access.	The policy intent exists; the leverage point is school–clinic–community linkage so that SRH services, contraception access, and referral pathways become routine, not optional.
Zambia	National Adolescent Health Strategic Plan (2022–2026) defines standards for adolescent/youth friendly services and delivery modalities including SRH priorities and coordination approaches.	
Zimbabwe	National Health Strategy 2021 – 2025 includes adolescent and youth health priorities (including SRH- related programming within the national health planning framework)	

4) Digital Inclusion + online safety (closing the digital risk gap)		
Malawi	Digital Economy Strategy 2021 – 2026 prioritizes universal access (internet access, device access, skills/education, digital services) including rural and vulnerable groups	Digital expansion can either reduce exclusion or increase exploitation risk. The opportunity is pairing access/ connectivity with safe digital learning, child online protection, and SRH education access for rural girls.
Zambia	National ICT Policy (2023) prioritizes bridging the digital divide and inclusive digital transformation	
Zimbabwe	National ICT Policy (2022 – 2027); Cyber and Data Protection Act 2021 (Chapter 12:07) + S.I 125 of 2024 commits to reducing the digital divide and expanding ICT usage across sectors including education related ICT development	
5) Climate resilience + education continuity		
Malawi	National Climate Change Management Policy (2016) mandates integration of climate change into development planning and highlights education/ awareness as a priority area.	Climate shocks amplify livelihood stress and school disruption, both linked to higher EMP risk so climate, education, and protection systems must be connected in preparedness and response.
Zambia	Green economy and climate change Act No 18 of 2024 establishes climate governance and includes an explicit provision area: the integration of climate change in learning programmes – direct education linkage	
Zimbabwe	Climate Change Management Bill, H.B. 5 of 2025 seeks to mainstream climate response across sectors	

Women Aged 20 - 24 Married Before 18.





**Girls
Between
15yrs – 19yrs
have
experienced
pregnancy.**

Together, these indicators show that legal reform has not yet translated into lived protection: too many girls still shift from schooling into marriage or early motherhood, undermining education completion and national development

So why does EMP persist despite strong frameworks?

- **Policies are strong but delivery is fragmented:** education retention measures, adolescent SRH services, social protection and shock response often operate in parallel, leaving gaps for rural girls.
- **Enforcement and referral chains break closest to risk:** legal protection exists, but case management, resourcing, and accountability are uneven where risk is highest.
- **System triggers are not linked:** climate stress, food insecurity, digital exclusion, and SRH access barriers converge into EMP but planning and budgeting are rarely joined up around this convergence point.

The legal foundation is already in place. The leadership opportunity now is to move from “**sector success**” to “**systems success**” linking education, health, protection, digital safeguards and climate resilience into one coordinated delivery model around the girls most at risk. With comparable legal frameworks already established across the region, performance differences (for example, lower teen pregnancy in Zimbabwe and lower child marriage in Zambia relative to peers) create a clear regional benchmark: the question is no longer whether progress is possible, but how quickly it can be achieved and sustained. A country that becomes the first to operationalize a fully coordinated education–health–protection–digital–climate response will set the regional standard for ending EMP and accelerating girls’ education outcomes.

Recommendations

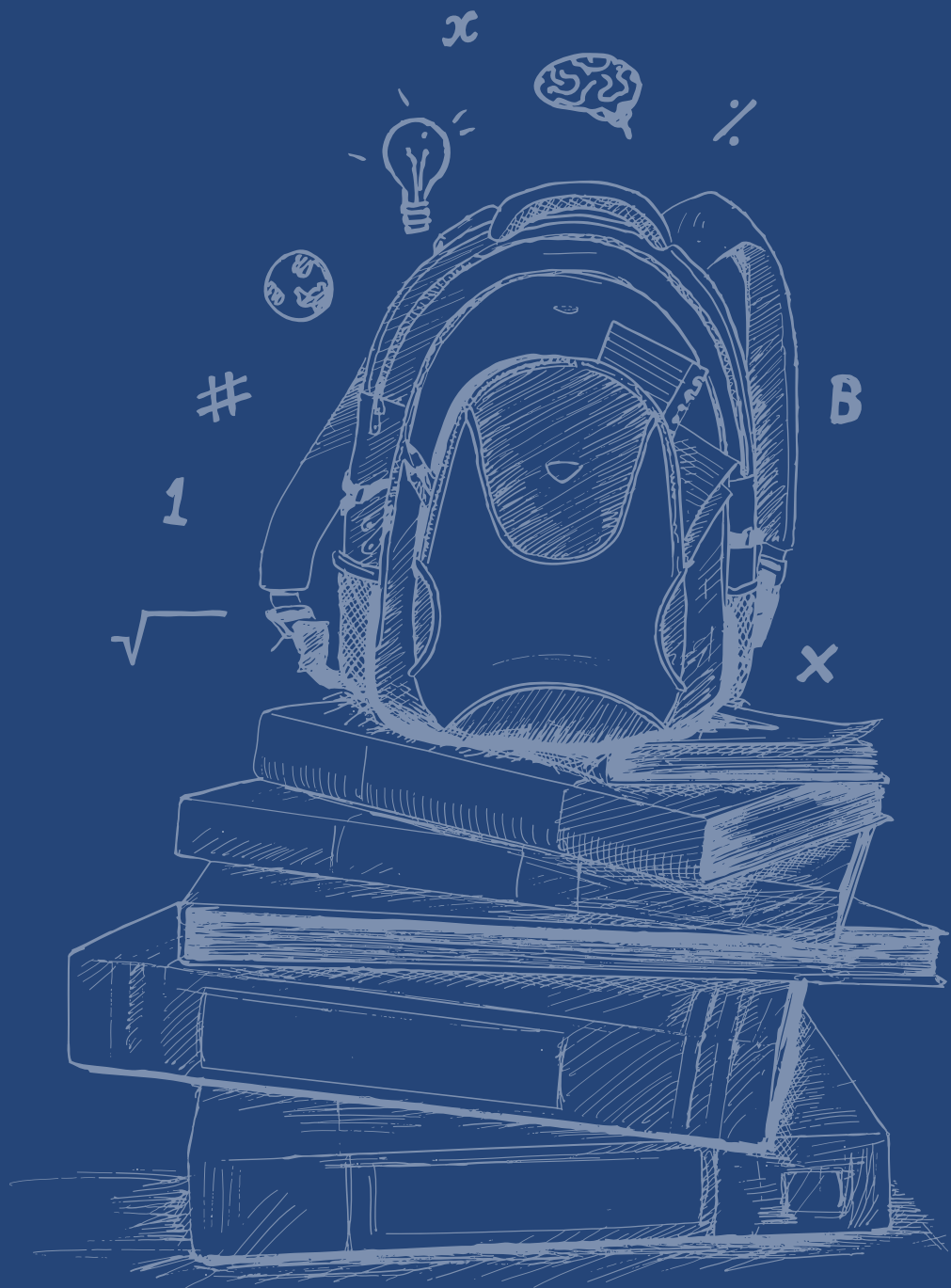
Establish an Inter Ministerial EMP & Girls’ Education Taskforce (Education, Health, Social Development, Finance, ICT, Environment/Climate) to deliver one coordinated package that prevents EMP and keeps rural girls in school. Parliamentarians play an essential role ensure gender-responsive national budgeting for the integrated package and conduct routine progress evaluation.

WHILE the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education drives retention and re entry, the Ministry of Health delivers adolescent friendly SRH services, Department of Social Development/ Welfare anchor case management and shock responsive support, Ministry of ICT expands safe digital access, and Ministry of Environment/Climate embeds education continuity in crisis response.

The leadership priority is to make these efforts operate as one system through one joint workplan, one district protocol, and one quarterly dashboard tracking retention, referrals and re entry outcomes for rural girls.

Conclusion

Strong frameworks exist, but the evidence shows that without coordinated delivery, girls remain exposed to the same convergence of risks that accelerates EMP and force school exit. The opportunity now is to shift from laws and plans to **joined-up implementation**: an Education-led mechanism that links schools, adolescent SRH services, child protection case management, digital safeguards, and shock-responsive support around those facing the highest barriers to staying in school. Delivering this package at scale will accelerate retention, re entry and completion for rural girls and position national leadership to set a regional benchmark on ending EMP.



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