

Teacher Wage Bill Constraints: Perspectives from the Classroom



Summary of findings

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Introduction

Constraints to the teacher wage bill blocks teacher recruitment and limits teacher salaries. This exacerbates teacher shortages and decreases the attractiveness of the profession, impeding the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 4 on quality education for all.

This document summarises evidence from **Malawi**, **Nepal** and **Zambia** on International Monetary Fund (IMF) advice regarding the teacher wage bill, and teachers' perspectives on their employment and working conditions in public schools. Insights from teachers on "the frontlines" of education delivery were gathered through surveys, interviews and focus groups in each country.¹

IMF Advice to Constrain the Public Wage Bill

The IMF continues to steer countries towards austerity policies and the cutting or freezing of the public sector wage bill.

In Nepal, the IMF has called for the government to limit the public sector wage bill on multiple occasions. In 2017 it recommended cuts to government spending on health and education workers² and in 2018 it called for more to be done to ensure fiscal sustainability.³ In 2020, the government was advised to freeze the public sector wage bill at 2.9% of GDP through to 2024.⁴ However, faced with public criticism to the introduction of austerity measures, the government increased the salaries of its employees by 2000 Nepalese Rupees (approximately USD\$16) per month in 2021.

In Malawi, the public wage bill increased by 1.5% of GDP from 6.9% to 8.4% between 2015 and 2020 despite the IMF's advice to constrain it. In 2020, following Malawi's application for a Rapid Credit Facility loan, the

1 The research was conducted by: Prabin Kumar Acharya, Mohit Acharya (Nepal); Limbani Eliya Nspato (Malawi); and Gideon Bulwani (Zambia). Where references are not provided in the text, the data comes from teacher interviews.

2 International Monetary Fund. (2017). 2017 ARTICLE IV CONSULTATION. Washington: International Monetary Fund.

3 International Monetary Fund. (2019). 2018 ARTICLE IV CONSULTATION. Washington: International Monetary Fund.

4 International Monetary Fund. (2020). 2020 ARTICLE IV CONSULTATION. Washington: International Monetary Fund.

IMF called for rationalising and freezing the wage bill with a ceiling of 7.5%.⁵ In November 2021, an IMF statement advised “curtailing growth in wages”.⁶

In Zambia, the IMF advised the government to cut the public sector wage bill by 1% between FY16-23 and to meet a target of 7.7%.⁷

The imposition of public sector wage bill constraints greatly impacts the education sector, whose workers make up a significant proportion of government employees. In Malawi, for instance, the education wage bill constitutes approximately half of the total public wage bill.⁸

What is the share of financing that goes to education?

The table below provides information on education financing according to the most recent data. None of the four countries meet the internationally recommended targets of allocating at least 6% of GDP and 20% of total government expenditure to education.

	Education expenditure as a percentage of GDP (%) (international target = 6%)	Education expenditure as a percentage of total government expenditure (%) (international target = 20%)
Malawi	4.7(4.4% in 2021*)	15.8
Nepal	5.1	14.1
Senegal	4.8	21.5
Zambia	4.6	16.9

Source: Global Education Monitoring Report 2021 [Home - 2021/2 GEM Report \(unesco.org\)](https://www.unesco.org/en/gem-report-2021) (data from 2019)

* National data provided by researcher.

5 International Monetary Fund (IMF) (2020), Malawi: Request for Disbursement Under the Rapid Credit Facility-Press Release; Staff Report; and Statement by the Executive Director for Malawi. <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/CR/Issues/2020/10/20/Malawi-Request-for-Disbursement-Under-the-Rapid-Credit-Facility-Press-Release-Staff-Report-49831>

6 International Monetary Fund (2021). IMF Staff Completes 2021 Article IV Mission to the Republic of Malawi. Press Release No.21/320. 5 November 2021. <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2021/11/04/pr21320-malawi-imf-staff-completes-2021-article-iv-mission-to-the-republic-of-malawi>.

7 Actionaid, Educational International and Public Services International (2021). The Public Versus Austerity: Why Public Sector Wage Bill Constraints Must End. Johannesburg: Actionaid. <https://actionaid.org/publications/2021/public-versus-austerity-why-public-sector-wage-bill-constraints-must-end>

8 Ministry of Finance (2021), National Budget 2020/21. Lilongwe: Ministry of Finance.

How Can Teacher Wage Bill Constraints Be Felt on the Frontlines?

Employment Conditions

In Nepal, researchers estimate that permanent teachers are paid, according to experience and level of education taught, approximately 30 000 rupees per month (or USD 251). Early childhood education teachers - a predominantly female profession - earn much less (15 000 rupees, equivalent to approximately USD 125).

Teachers' salaries have mainly stagnated in relation to inflation. Teachers report irregular payment of salaries, a lack of benefits, and the need to take on second jobs to make ends meet. Many teachers are also concerned about retirement due to a lack of social security.

In Malawi, researchers estimate that the average teacher salary is approximately 129 000 Malawian Kwacha (USD 160.55). Teachers interviewed reported difficulties having enough money to support their families and emphasised the inadequacy of teacher housing.

In Zambia, researchers estimate that teacher salaries range from approximately 3790 Zambian Kwacha (236 USD) to 6570 Zambian Kwacha (407 USD). For comparison, the cost of living for a family is estimated at 6146 Zambian Kwacha⁹. Many teachers interviewed reported that they had second jobs due to teaching salaries that did not allow them to cover their living expenses.

Temporary teachers: perspectives from the frontlines in Nepal

Temporary teachers include contract, relief and “private” (public school teachers paid directly from school resources) who are hired on precarious contracts and do not enjoy the same benefits, allowances, or social security as that of permanent teachers. According to interviews conducted with teachers, the numbers of temporary teachers is especially high in rural areas and newly established schools.

The paragraphs below provide testimonies from temporary teachers, a school leader and union leader on the employment and working conditions they face:

“The government does not provide us with the same respect as a permanent teacher. Moreover, whenever we try to involve ourselves in the decision-making process, our views are not considered and neither are we acknowledged. Even if we consider ourselves a part of the school, we are constantly reminded that we are not and this leads us to feel demotivated.” (contract teacher)

“I have been teaching mathematics for 28 years in Viswa Niketan School in Kathmandu Nepal. I am a public-school teacher but my salary is paid from the school resources. In all these years I was never promoted. I do not get any allowances, and I do not get pension after retirement. I am really anxious what will happen to me after I retire.” – (“private” teacher)

“Without working multiple jobs, I cannot be certain that the income of the school will let me sustain for a month. I am obliged to work multiple jobs so that I have some money if there is an emergency.” (contract teacher in Kohalpur)

“I am headmaster of the Viswa Niketan School in Kathmandu and more than 60% of our teachers are paid salaries from the school's resources. It is a huge burden on the school. When a teacher paid by the government retires, it takes years to get a replacement from the government...But students can't wait so we are forced to hire private teachers.” (headmaster)

“[During the pandemic school closures] Permanent teachers received salaries but teachers in private schools lost jobs. There are 17 types of teachers in schools, some receiving benefits and some none. We are working to ensure that we have only one type of teacher and there is no discrimination. We also want performance-based promotions.” (Rajendra Raj Paudel, National President, Nepal Teachers' Association)



Employment conditions: perspectives from the frontlines

Malawi

“The salaries are inadequate for teachers, now we live in the place where the prices of goods are going up every day. Not all teachers are accommodated in government houses, like for example personally I live in a rented house. The rent goes up every year. Not only that, you have to pay utilities, you have to buy and sustain your home, you have to buy groceries and the like. So, the problem is, the salary is not enough, you end up going to debt...The whole teaching profession is like a struggle not only at work, but also at home, trying to make ends meet.” (secondary school teacher)

Nepal

“As our salaries are very low, we have to take loans from relatives in order to meet our monthly expenses and also have to pay the interest on it. When we receive our salaries, we pay back the loan. This cycle has been continuing for the past 12 years. It has become a way of life for me.” (relief teacher)

Zambia

“My salary is a slave salary. Our conditions of service are pathetic. I am a special education teacher, but I am not paid any allowance as per conditions of service stipulations. My housing allowance is K1200 (US\$75) which is too low to rent a better house because most decent houses are worth K3500 (US\$218.75). From this low allowance, how does one expect a teacher to be motivated to do his or her best in class? It is very hard. I feel the Government has taken our professional commitment for granted. I am teaching double class which are grades 5 and 6 but I do not get any allowances for teaching such classes because of the salary scale I am in which I feel is unfair. Teaching several classes increases the burden on the teachers and affects focus.” (teacher)

Teacher Shortages, Working Conditions and Quality Education

Teachers interviewed in all countries referred to teacher shortages and in turn, high pupil: teacher ratios (PTR) ratios, high workload, and a negative impact on health and wellbeing. They perceived all of these impacts as detrimental to the quality of teaching and learning

In Nepal, researchers report that the number of teachers recruited between 2014 and 2018 rose by 15%, whilst the number of students increased by 50%. There is a gender dimension to the shortages; in Nepal, there are almost half the number of female teachers in Nepal than male teachers. Attrition is a problem – almost 8% of teachers leave the profession each year and between 40% and 50% leave within their first five years of teaching.

In Malawi, there is an acute teacher shortage. According to researcher estimates, in 2020, at least 3,305 teachers in primary education were unqualified. With a primary PTR of 65:1 in 2019/20, Malawi needs to recruit 52,459 primary school teachers to achieve a ratio of 40:1 by 2030. However, recruiting the needed teachers would increase the education wage bill by 63%, which would in turn push the overall public wage bill to 9.9% of the GDP (2.4% higher than the IMF's recommended ceiling of 7.5%). In the last quarter of 2021, the government recruited 2003 primary school teachers. However, there are still approximately 8000 teachers that are trained but not working.

In Zambia, it is estimated that there are over 50 000 trained and qualified teachers that have not been recruited, yet in 2021 the Teaching Service Commission advertised only 1300 teaching positions to replace teachers that retired, passed away or resigned. No new positions were advertised. There is also a decreasing number of people applying to train as teachers, likely due to the lack of job opportunities available in the public education sector. The University of Zambia School of Education enrolled 270 students in 2022, a steep decline from the usual 4000 students.

Many teachers interviewed reported a particular shortage of science and mathematics teachers. One rural secondary school leader reported having to rely solely on volunteer teachers for these subjects. Meanwhile, some headteachers reported that they were having to take on teaching duties in addition to their management responsibilities to fill teacher gaps.

Official pupil: teacher ratios (PTR)

The latest data on the official pupil: teacher ratios in primary and secondary schools in the four countries are listed below. However, these numbers are averages which mask stark differences across regions and between neighbourhoods and schools.

	Pupil: teacher ratio in primary education	Pupil: teacher ratio in (lower) secondary education
Malawi	55 (2019)*	68 (2019)
Nepal	20 (2019)	28 (2019)
Senegal	34 (2019)	19 (2017)WB
Zambia	42 (2017)WB**	25 (1988)WB

Source: Global Education Monitoring Report 2021 Home - 2021/2 GEM Report (unesco.org). Those marked with WB is data from: <https://data.worldbank.org/>.

* According to the Ministry of Education in Malawi, the PTR was 65:1 in 2020. Meanwhile, the average PTR reported by 100 survey participants was 71:1. Respondents in Thyolo reported an average PTR of 87:1.

** According to the Ministry of General Education in Zambia the PTR the average PTR at primary level was 61.9:1 in 2018. Researchers reported finding a PTR of between 80-120 across 10 primary schools visited.

Teacher shortages and quality education: perspectives from the frontlines

Malawi

“The teacher shortage makes it hard for teachers to teach effectively. For instance, in my case, I fail to prepare thoroughly for the class in terms of preparing the resources to use in class. At family level, I am unable to attend to my family since most of my time is spent at school due to heavy workload”. (primary school teacher, Lilongwe)

Nepal

“We do not have enough subject teachers. Our student teacher ratio is as high as 65:1.” (Surendra Kumar Ghimire, Branch Leader Nepal National Teachers’ Association)

Zambia

"I am trained to teach the primary section. I usually handle grades 1 to 7, but sometimes, I am assigned to teach grades 8 and 9. This has the potential to affect delivery of quality instructions to attain quality education. In my school multi-grade teaching is the order of the day because we have very few staff, but I am not paid any allowance contrarily to the conditions of service. Due to shortage of subject teachers, sometimes I am pushed into teaching classes I am not trained to teach. Because of shortage of teachers the quality of education may be compromised." (teacher)

Recommendations

Researchers in each country made a detailed set of recommendations to advance quality education for all and uphold the rights of teachers and education workers. However, across all four countries, there are some common recommendations.

Firstly, governments should **increase education financing and reject austerity measures** advised by the IMF, whose advice may not align with the achievement of country priorities. It must be recognized that recurrent spending on teacher salaries is not a cost, it is an investment in an important economic sector and an investment in the future economy and society of the country.

Secondly, **teacher salaries should be raised** to ensure that they are on par with the salaries of other professionals with similar qualifications. Teachers should not have to take on second jobs and have quality terms of employment including stable, permanent jobs and appropriate benefits and allowances.

Thirdly, **teacher shortages should be addressed**. Steps should be taken to attract people into the profession and the necessary funding should be made available to recruit enough teachers to at least meet the internationally recognized benchmarks on pupil: teacher ratios.

Finally, governments must listen to the experiences of those on the frontlines and **engage in regular and meaningful social dialogue with teacher unions** to collaboratively identify and solve the most pressing problems that risk obstructing every child's right to quality education.



"I was previously a government appointed teacher but now my salary is paid from the school resources. I do not get any allowances; I do not get a pension after retirement. I am really anxious about what will happen to me after I retire."

Niram Tara Tuladhar, mathematics teacher, Nepal.



"In my class I have a total of 100 learners. When I am teaching, it is very difficult for me to deliver the lesson effectively. We are understaffed at our school. There are 2.500 learners and only 23 teachers, including the head teacher."

Edina Chauluka, teacher, Malawi.



"I am a special education teacher, but I am not paid any allowance as per conditions of service stipulations. Teaching several classes increases the burden on the teachers and affects focus."

Judith Chikonde, special education teacher, Zambia.

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