

SPOTLIGHT INITIATIVE BULLETIN

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GENDER EQUALITY: A CATALYTIC ACCELERATOR FOR AGENDA 2030



Maria Jose Torres Macho

UN Resident Coordinator

The year 2020 marked the 75th anniversary of the United Nations representing tremendous global achievements in terms of maintaining international peace and security and promoting social progress, better living standards, and human rights for all. Yet the world is confronting one of the most perverse crises due to the COVID19 Pandemic, while launching a decade of action to accelerate work towards the achievement of the 2030 agenda. What is becoming more notorious in all debates, north and south, is that women are rightly demanding equality and freedom from violence and discrimination.

The realisation of Sustainable Development Goal 5 on gender equality is central to the UN's work and a catalytic accelerator of the decade for action in line with the 2030 agenda. We believe that success under this goal will unlock countless opportunities for peace, prosperity, and growth, and will invariably lead to progress under all SDGs. If we take a closer look at the other 16 SDGs, we see that all of them complement SDG 5, and that the meaningful participation and empowerment of women and girls is a pre-requisite for their achievement.

Whether or not we succeed on SDG 5 depends immensely on our ability to eliminate Violence against Women and Girls (E-VaWG). This is why the UN and the EU formed a strategic partnership and together launched the Spotlight Initiative (SI): an SDG 5 Flagship Programme focused on eradicating VaWG. As long as women and girls cannot enjoy a life free of violence- there can be no gender equality, and as long as individuals, societies and institutions continue to discriminate against women and girls, VaWG will remain widespread and routine. Stopping violence against women and girls will reduce overall levels of violence in communities and drive forward the development agenda, benefiting both men and women.

Now at the mid-term point of implementation, the SI has made

substantial progress towards improving the lives of Malawian women and girls. For instance, nearly 1 million adolescent girls and boys have been trained and empowered to raise their voices against harmful behaviours that perpetuate VaWG in their communities. In 2020, approximately 20,000 survivors of violence received services – ranging from health, psychosocial support, legal aid, and services to improve their livelihoods. The SI is establishing and strengthening national and local networks of women and girls, in a bid to foster the kind of movement building that might revolutionise the way a country handles VaWG- just as the #metoo movement did across the globe.

The disproportionate impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on women and girls both nationally and globally is undoubtedly rooted in discrimination against women and girls. Cases of rape more than doubled in Malawi during 2020 compared with 2018, and the country saw over 13,000 new child marriages during the year. These figures rightly sparked outrage by Malawian citizens- marches were organised, petitions signed, and H.E. President Lazarus Chakwera demonstrated the Malawian Government's commitment to E-VaWG by setting up a high-level Taskforce on Sexual Violence.

I am, in fact, greatly encouraged by this mindset change in Malawi. I see it as a promising reflection of the ever-growing intolerance of abuses targeting over 50% of the country's population. The SI took the pulse of public opinion regarding VaWG in a recent nationwide poll. Of 232,000 pollsters, 82% acknowledge that VaWG is an issue of concern in their community- an impressive 18% increase from the same poll conducted in 2018. This increased awareness on VaWG is extremely positive and is partly the result of the SI sensitising some 3 million individuals on VaWG in 2020 alone.

Through the SI, we have witnessed how cultural practices can evolve to place the welfare of individuals at the centre, leaving behind harmful behaviours and embracing practices that prioritise opportunities for individuals and communities alike. It is really impressive to see local authorities, traditional leaders, and communities at work - over 40% of our implementing partners are grassroots actors and their flight to counteract negative norms and attitudes that victimize women and girls is crucial. Given the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on women and girls, who bear the brunt of the economic fallout, the SI remains committed to facilitating a better targeted response to their needs. Malawi's future depends on whether or not the full potential of women and girls is unlocked to effectively contribute to the nation's socio-economic development, in line with Malawi Vision 2063. There is no time to lose.

SPOTLIGHT INITIATIVE: TACKLING VAWG FROM ALL ANGLES**Aurelie Valtat****EU Delegation Chargé d'Affaires**

Regrettably, gender-based violence has been in the news almost daily for the past year in Malawi, with a significant increase in Gender Based Violence cases in 2020 compared to 2018 and 2019. Last December the Ministry of Gender, Community Development and Social Welfare shared alarming figures regarding defilement, rape and child marriages; all on the rise in 2020 compared to the previous years.

This increasing trend has been exacerbated in 2020 with the 5-month long school closure due to Covid-19, but cannot solely be attributed to this factor. A number of harmful cultural practices, combined with extreme poverty, lack of access to education and lack of access to sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR) also explain the high prevalence of GBV in Malawi. That's why SPOTLIGHT is tackling the challenge from all angles, taking into account legal, institutional, educational, health and cultural perspectives.

After two years of implementation, the Spotlight Initiative has registered a number of important results towards the Elimination of Violence against Women and Girls (E-VaWG). The programme will soon start its second phase for an additional year and as the EU we are looking forward to the results this programme will reach.

As the EU, we recently reaffirmed our commitment to fighting gender-based violence with our new Gender Action Plan III which was adopted in November 2020.

With this plan, we will go beyond the fight against violence in an attempt to achieve real empowerment and

full participation. Like an X-Ray scanner, COVID-19 revealed inequalities in all societies, more than what we already knew. Not only, we also gradually realized that several of the measures introduced to mitigate the spread of the virus had the unintended consequence of further deepening these inequalities. As a result, the important progress towards achieving the SDG 5 (and all SDGs in general) made over decades is at risk. Women and girls are in the frontline and affected by the crisis and this makes our new Action Plan even more relevant to the sustainable recovery we now need.

We have to act quickly to build back better and sustainable societies, in which women and men, have equal rights and opportunities. A truly gender-equal world.

This new Action Plan on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE) in external Relations for the next years 2021-2025 wants to be a strong political commitment from the EU to make gender equality a key objective in our common foreign and security policy. This goes from the multilateral fora and structured dialogues with partner countries to EU policy proposals or financing of projects.

On the positive side, in Malawi we are building on a solid ground as Gender Equality and Women Empowerment are already at the core of the EU action in several areas.

Finally let me conclude this short overview with an additional mention to the EU-UN joint Programme Spotlight. Spotlight represents the first global initiative supported by the EU specifically on Gender and allows us to put girls and women at the centre while working on the different dimensions of vulnerability to achieve the ultimate goal of eliminating violence against women and girls. It is through initiatives like this that the EU intends to achieve the ambitious targets set in the EU Gender Action Plan.

Together with all the UN agencies involved, the EU is keen to ensure Spotlight is successful to build the case and pave the way for more gender-focused initiatives in partnership with the Government of Malawi in the years to come.

BUILDING PATHWAYS FOR ENDING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS AT THE AFRICA GENDER EQUALITY CONFERENCE

By Faith Mvula- UNWOMEN



The First Lady of the Republic of Malawi , Madame Monica Chakwera officially opening the Africa Gender Equality Conference at the State House. Photo : For Equality

“As we hear COVID-19 voices, stories and lived experiences of women and girls from across the continent on how the pandemic has effected them, it is my hope that we will all be propelled to action, both individually and collectively,” said Monica Chakwera, First Lady of the Republic of Malawi, speaking at the opening of the Annual Africa Gender Equality Conference.

Dubbed #AGEC2021, the first-ever Annual Africa Gender Equality Conference marked International Women’s Day in Lilongwe, Malawi, and across the continent.

Over 2,500 participants from 38 countries took part in the 3-day conference under the theme “*Women in leadership: Achieving an equal future in a COVID-19 world*”. Participants from communities, government, civil society organizations, private sector, academia and

media across the continent, including gender specialists, women’s rights activists and young people, came together to celebrate the advances made so far in gender equality and discuss solutions to emerging barriers and challenges posed by COVID-19. Sponsored by the Government of Malawi in partnership with the Spotlight Initiative and an array of civil society organizations, the conference was also an opportunity to reflect on the journey of the women’s movement and the role of women and girls in shaping a more equal future while recovering from the pandemic.

Alongside the First Lady of Malawi, the spouse of the Vice President, Mary Chilima, Minister of Gender, Community Development and Social Welfare of Malawi Patricia Kaliati, Deputy Minister of Local Government of Malawi Halima Daud, and former Minister of Investment, Trade

and Industry of Botswana Bogolo Joy Kenewendo were among the many government officials, dignitaries and women leaders from all sectors of public life who participated in the conference.

A high-level side event on the EU-UN Spotlight Initiative to eliminate violence against women and girls offered a platform to assess progress and challenges in implementing the Initiative in Malawi and discuss promising practices to create a world free of violence for women and girls. As global and national statistics register a rise in cases of violence against women and girls, child marriages and unwanted teenage pregnancies since the start of the pandemic, with record numbers of rapes recorded in Malawi in 2020, the discussion highlighted the importance of working with boys and men to stop the violence and achieve gender equality. Efforts must focus on creating positive masculinities and challenging negative gender stereotypes, as well as creating spaces for men to become allies of feminist movements and

agents of change, the panel noted. "Everyone, including men and boys, must play their part in eliminating violence against women and girls. As part of the Spotlight Initiative, the 'Barbershop Toolkit' provides a safe space for men to talk to each other. I think that dialogue 'man to man' is helping a lot (...) going not against *men* but against *behaviours*", remarked María José Torres, UN Malawi Resident Coordinator, during the side event. The barbershop toolkit is one of the many tools the Spotlight Initiative uses in its work on engaging men and boys for gender equality, in Malawi and across the globe.

The 3-day conference, whose vibrant programme included panel discussions, survivors' stories, capacity-building workshops, film screening and an all-female concert, culminated in the Africa Gender Equality Conference 2021 capturing the collective demand to put women at the centre of the COVID-19 response.



EU Delegation to Malawi Chargè d'Affaires Aurelie Valtat, UN Resident Coordinator to Malawi Maria Jose Torres Macho and Minister of Gender, Community Development and Social Welfare Honourable Patricia Kaliati stand for the Malawi National Anthem during the opening. Photo credit : For Equality.

FROM GENDER BASED VIOLENCE VICTIMS TO VICTORS

By Faith Mvula-UNWOMEN and Mphatso Kapito-FOYODE



25-year-old Amina Yusuf (not her real name) has seen it all when it comes to Gender Based Violence (GBV). A survivor of GBV, Amina endured physical and emotional abuse from the man she thought would love her for eternity. When Amina was beaten unconscious, she reported the abuse to marriage councillors. They advised her not to leave her home, “as misunderstandings happen in every marriage.”

“I had been in an abusive marriage for a long time. He would come home drunk and beat me often. I consulted our marriage counsellors to intervene, but they did very little to change things. They simply were not helpful,” said Amina.

Amina is amongst 42% of married women who have experienced spousal violence in Malawi (Malawi Demographic and Health Survey 2015-16). Despite a robust legislative and policy framework to promote

gender equality and tackle gender-based violence, the prevalence rate of violence against women continues to be high in Malawi. MDHS, reports that sixty percent of women and girls in Malawi have experienced violence in one way or another and statistics show that 53 percent of married women report their current husbands as the perpetrators of the violence they face.

However, not all the perpetrators are brought to justice for many reasons including societal acceptance of harmful cultural practices, fear of stigma or retaliation, lack of confidence in the system, and financial constraints.

For a long time, Amina chose to persevere in her violent marriage as her ex-husband was the family breadwinner. “I had nowhere to go. I chose to live with my husband despite the abuse. Where could I go with the children?” recalls Amina.

Light at the end of tunnel

Amina has now left her abusive marriage, thanks to support she received through the Spotlight Initiative, funded by the European Union. She attended a Spotlight Initiative-supported orientation to increase women's knowledge and skills on all forms of gender-based violence and harmful cultural practices that put their lives at risk. Through community engagements, women learnt about how to report violence and access support. Forum for Youth Development (Foyode) - a Spotlight Initiative partner, also empowers survivors to be financially empowered through 'Village Banks' popularly known as 'BankiM'khonde.'

"During the first session I participated in, the trainers told us to write any problem we face in our homes in line with what we had learnt. I wrote about the abuse I was enduring at the time- that gave me the courage to change my life" said Amina.

Amina was encouraged to join a village bank to help her start a small-scale business.

"I am happy because I am among 37 women who are in different village banks. I am now able to help my family financially through my small-scale grocery business," Amina says.

Other gender-based violence survivors in the area have similar success stories of benefitting from village banks.

"The proceeds I get from my fish business help me to put food on the table for my three children. I have stopped depending on casual labour because I have a permanent source of income," said Agnes Chitopola (31), a single mother and a beneficiary of a village bank from Kwacha Village. Elina Bwanali (22) from a surrounding village, said the money from her village bank group helped her to buy three bags of fertilizer.

"I am grateful to the Spotlight Initiative. I now know a lot about gender-based violence. As a farmer I am self-reliant and hope to have a bumper yield after applying fertilizer in my field of maize," says Elina.

FOYODE Programmes Manager, Cecilia Wauriwa, explains that village banks have been crucial in empowering survivors of GBV in Ngokwe, Machinga. "Most of the times women in the area endure violence in their homes because they depend on the perpetrators, village banks have given survivors a livelihood and emboldened them to speak up against gender-based violence in their communities."



Generic photos used to protect identity of the source.

Photo credit: UNWOMEN and FOYODE

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

not only has negative consequences for women but also their families, the community and the country at large.



FIGHTING THE TEEN PREGNANCY SCOURGE

By Joseph Scott-UNFPA Communications Analyst



Jane (not her real name) is only 11 but she is seven months pregnant. This happened during last year long COVID-19 school break that kept students away from school for close to nine months. By then, Jane was in standard four.

The news of Jane's pregnancy reached far and wide, including the authorities.

"It was quite a shock when we heard about the story," says Patricia Makunganya, a Child Protection Worker based in Traditional Authority Chamba in Machinga. "We tracked the boy responsible for the pregnancy and brought him to face the law."

Poverty and Covid-19 pandemic

Jane, who is an orphan, stays with her aged grandmother. The two don't have known relatives and survive by begging.

"It's tough because they are already struggling. With a new addition (to their family), things will be more difficult

for them," says Makunganya. "However, our main concern now is that she may face complications during birth as she is still too young."

A few villages away from Jane's home lives 14-year-old Alice. The shy young girl got married in July, last year. Alice says she was bored staying at home during the Covid-19 school break and thought of getting married.

"I wasn't thinking clearly," says Alice who was in standard six. "My friends were saying schools will not open again and I decided to get married."

Covid-19: teen pregnancies and child marriage

Machinga is one of the districts in Malawi that has recorded high cases of teen pregnancy during the Covid-19 break. During the time schools were closed for a Covid-19 break, the district recorded 1568 cases of teen pregnancies.

"Our area, Traditional Authority Chamba alone, has had high cases of teen pregnancies," says Makunganya. "In

total, we have had 82 pregnancies and from that figure, 42 girls got married during the school break.”

“The issue also affected young boys. About 14 of the marriages we recorded included those of boys below the age of 18.”

With support from the Spotlight Initiative, stakeholders in the district have intensified awareness campaigns on child marriages and are advocating for strict enforcement of the law that prohibits children under 18 from getting married.

Helping women and girls cope with the pandemic

The Spotlight Initiative also procured bicycles and motor bikes for child protection workers and mentors to enable them to reach hard to reach areas. The improvement in mobility brought together stakeholders in Traditional Authority (TA) Chamba to withdraw 31 young girls from child marriage.

“The motorcycles from the Spotlight Initiative came at a right time,” says Makunganya. “Some of the places are far and we couldn’t reach them on foot. And this is where we had so many cases of child marriages. Improved mobility saw us intensifying our drive to withdraw more girls from these sham marriages.”

Alice is one of the many girls withdrawn from child marriage with support from the Spotlight Initiative. She is now a member of a safe space in her village where she and other girls meet to discuss and learn about issues that affects their lives without fear of judgment or harm.

Ray of hope for former child brides

“When Alice joined the safe space, she was timid. But now, she is confident and actively participates in group activities,” explains Vanessa Bakali, Mentor Focal Person for TA Chamba area.

“We have many girls who have been in her situation but through the safe spaces, we can see a big change in them. They are now ready to face the world with the right knowledge.”

The Spotlight Initiative has trained 140 mentors in Machinga and 3293 mentees are participating in the mentorship sessions in safe spaces. The Mentorship Programme within the Initiative works alongside community structures such as the Community Victim Support Unit, Community Policing Forum and Child Protection Committees, to ensure that women and girls access relevant services in their communities.



Patricia Makunganya; Child Protection Worker for T/A Chamba, Machinga.



Vanessa Bakali, Mentor Focal Person with Alice during a counselling session.

Main picture: Marjorie Chipofya, UNFPA Gender Based Violence Services Officer under the Spotlight Initiative talking to a mother of one of the girls rescued from a child marriage in Machinga.

All photos by Joseph Scott-UNFPA

FEMINIST MOVEMENT BUILDING IN THE GBV SECTOR: A CRITICAL COMPONENT FOR ENDING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS



Teemar Kidane
National Coordinator
Spotlight Initiative-UNRCO

In 2017 the #metoo movement sparked an unprecedented global conversation about sexual violence after several famous women exposed powerful men for sexually exploiting women and girls. The movement was remarkable because it illustrated the massive extent of violence against women and girls (VaWG) while exposing harmful belief systems that normalise abuse. The movement further shifted social norms and opinions by engendering compassion for survivors, thus de-stigmatising sexual abuse and giving survivors the courage to speak up about their experiences.

Looking back, it seems obvious that the ambitious quest to eliminate VaWG does require a powerful movement to catalyse change- whether at global, national or community levels. The Spotlight Initiative (SI) is one such movement, through which the European Union and the United Nations are demonstrating an unprecedented commitment to eliminate VaWG. To date, the SI is the largest ever singular investment in ending VaWG that the world has ever seen.

Malawi is currently delivering one of 27 SI Country Programmes around the world, along with 5 regional programmes. With so many stakeholders engaged in jointly delivering the SI (Malawi alone has 31 implementing partners ranging from academia, media, community-based actors, Government and more)- the wheels of collective transformation are in motion.

The SI is a recent Programme, but global efforts to eliminate GBV through development and humanitarian work, are decades old. Anyone who has ever worked in this sector is almost certain to have lamented the fact that persons working to eliminate GBV are predominantly women, and of course, gender balance is important in any sector. Certainly, male presence in the GBV sector is essential if we are to counter the specious and outdated concept that GBV is a 'woman's issue', to be dealt with by women. Conversely, the female majority in the GBV sector workforce comes with vital

movement building opportunities that we have yet to fully tap into and that could revolutionise the way we do business.

The stark reality is that at *least* 1 in 3 women around the world have experienced violence at some point in their lives. Many women are drawn to working in this sector because of their empathy towards survivors of violence, which comes from a place of profound personal understanding. They have a deep-seated desire to bring about immense social change by eradicating violence against women and girls. They see the incredible potential of their communities, or countries, or the world to thrive - if only women and girls could live a life free of violence.

On that basis one would think that the GBV sector would be a natural platform for movement building, yet somehow this has not manifested. Why is this the case, in a sector crowded with women who feel passionate about eliminating the scourge of violence against women and girls, and who in all probability have first-hand experience of such violence?

While there may be various explanations, my own view as to why such a movement has not arisen is that it is because the GBV sector does not explicitly recognise, much less address the fact that women working in this field are among the 1 in 3. An institutionalised safe space or a platform for women working in GBV to be able to speak out about their traumas in a constructive and restorative manner does not exist, although we have created countless such spaces for 'other' women and girls.

In the absence of such a platform or safe space- the vast majority of women do not speak up for fear of being judged, stigmatised, or dismissed as hypocrites. Consequently, we have not yet engaged one another in a frank conversation on how our own personal experiences with violence shape our work. It is a conversation that is long overdue and that has arguably resulted in the GBV sector accepting embedded patriarchies that ignore the disparate and inter-sectional impacts of this work on women.

The dangers of ignoring how women working in GBV are just as likely to be affected by GBV are manifold:

We inadvertently exacerbate the mental health effects on survivors

There are thousands upon thousands of women who relive their traumas five days a week, just by going to work, and

who receive minimal, if any, mental health support. Where it exists, psychosocial support is usually focused on service providers, and even then, it is usually based on the generic notion that hearing accounts of violence every day can be incredibly damaging.

The support does not sufficiently acknowledge the secondary trauma that may arise from the possibility that those service providers may be survivors themselves. Psycho-social support to non-frontline workers on the other hand, is usually negligible. The absence of comprehensive mental health support to all those working in the GBV sector not only goes against the very principles and values that guide the sector's work, but against the broader, more seasoned concept of 'do no harm'. We may also be diminishing staff morale and wellbeing, and thus lowering productivity.

We diminish the scale and scope of the problem

By externalising GBV and VaWG to '*out there*', violence against women and girls is treated as an alien and distant problem that only affects a specific segment of society. In less developed countries where the divide between the rich and the poor is more accentuated, the message inferred is that VaWG is a problem for poor and marginalised communities and that is not a widespread and urgent phenomenon.

We inculcate division rather than foment unity

If ever there was a wasted opportunity for movement building, this is it. The 'us vs them' approach creates unnecessary distance between the development/ aid sectors, and the women and girls they seek to support- instead of enabling action from a place of unity, solidarity, and empathy. This reinforces obstructive power dynamics between development actors and 'beneficiaries' and results in major impediments to jointly programming *with* the communities we serve, rather than *for* them. Clearly, we also miss out on programming for ourselves, and thus a considerable chunk of VaWG is left untouched.

This approach further creates divide among development and aid actors; here, the institution takes precedence over the individual, and organisations end up in a self-defeating competition with so-called rivals for funding or limelight.

We weaken the survivor-centred approach, and therefore our programming

By ignoring the reality that women in the GBV sector experience violence, we suppress women's capacity to apply a survivor centred approach that would likely be highly pertinent and effective. Many become mechanical and theory focused instead of allowing their empathy and personal experiences to guide them. This directly opposes quintessential feminist concepts such as standpoint

feminism, which contends that true knowledge is derived from one's personal experiences, and that in order to understand others, thought has to start from our own lives. Applied to the GBV sector therefore, the point is that we must first understand how GBV affects our own lives if we are to fully understand and support survivors. In doing so, we acknowledge the common thread that links us together with the women and girls we serve and can programme with incredible accuracy because we are drawing from a place of authenticity.

We overlook intersectionality

Similar to the above, using one's own life experiences as a point of departure allows us to accommodate a multiplicity of viewpoints and perspectives- including race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, disability, religion, and more. Since these perspectives are based on personal experience, they are also sure to be accurate- thus allowing for targeted and inclusive programming that really does 'Leave No One Behind'.

In short, feminism in the GBV sector is all too often lost, and with it, the potential to galvanise a movement-like response that could potentially change everything, like the #metoo movement did. My sense is that infusing the GBV sector with the kind of feminist thinking that truly considers and positions *all* women's experiences with violence would promote genuine and unconditional programming and partnership building towards the elimination of VaWG.

You may be wondering how all this can be translated into action. It is my humble view that at a minimum, organisations and institutions working on GBV should ensure that mental health care is offered to all staff working on this topic as routine practice. However, let us start by elevating the voices of women working in the sector and listen carefully to better understand their needs and concerns. Clearly there will be nuances: the needs of a front-line service provider are likely quite different to those of a desk officer. Perhaps it is as simple as creating a safe space where we can have that candid conversation among women in the sector and brainstorm on how we can collectively combat gender blindness in a sector that is presumed to be gender sensitive. Perhaps that conversation will kickstart a movement.

We, the GBV sector, would do well to learn from the successes of the #metoo movement, mentioned above and I, for one, am keen to see how movement building can start with us: *all of us*. If we are to succeed, our point of departure must be our own truths and realities as women working in this sector. Let us begin by acknowledging the unambiguous truth that we, the women working in the GBV sector, are also among the 1 in 3, and *that* is the common thread that binds us together. #ustoo.

HOW THE SPOTLIGHT INITIATIVE IS CHANGING LIVES OF VULNERABLE GIRLS IN MALAWI: MALAIKA'S STORY

By James Chavula –UNICEF Consultant



Malaika Phiri (not her real name) is a Form Two girl from Chiwembe village in Ntchisi, a tobacco-growing district in central Malawi. The 15-year-old girl is the last-born in a family of two girls and three boys.

When her father died in 2016, her mother remarried, and her stepfather stepped in to support the family. Taking advantage of her desperation, the stepfather started making sexual advances as a precondition for him to meet her school needs. Malaika's resistance resulted in him no longer providing any support to her, forcing her to drop out of school.

Malaika's mother distils kachasu (local beer), but the traditional spirit fetches too little to keep the girl in school.

"I feared for my future because all my brothers and sisters (except the first-born sister who migrated to South Africa for

better economic opportunities), dropped out in secondary school because mom was struggling to pay school fees for them," she recounts. "In 2019, I spent six months at home while my friends were learning. When I returned to school, I went straight into Form Two, but only learnt for three weeks because I still had a balance with my school fees," she says. "The time I spent out of school, my friends were learning while I was at home. I had little time to study. Every time I opened books; teardrops soaked the pages. I constantly asked myself: Why always me?" she explains.

Her 'out of school' status continued when schools in Malawi closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Fortunately for her, there was light at the end of the tunnel when schools reopened in November 2020. She got good news that she was going to be put on scholarship. Currently she is one of over 600 girls on scholarships from UNICEF

under the Spotlight Initiative with support from the European Union (EU). The scholarship covers school fees, uniforms including shoes and socks, school bags, sanitary pads, and other basic educational supplies to ensure every girl learns.

Malaika is grateful for the Spotlight Initiative coming to her rescue when she needed it the most. She laments that the struggles for school fees puts poor girls at risk of sexual exploitation and abuse that lead to teen pregnancies, child marriages, high school dropout rates and sexually transmitted infections, including HIV.

“The scholarship came at the right time. Every time the headteacher sent me home to collect fees, I felt sad and ashamed. I spent months not knowing where the money would come from. This support increases my chances to remain in school and achieve my dreams. I am thankful and I will show it by working harder in class,” Malaika says.

The scholarship seeks to increase girls’ equal access to education, as evidence shows that keeping girls in school not only protects them from sexual violence- including early pregnancies and marriages, but also empowers them to challenge social norms in their communities.

Malaika, calls for an end to rampant violence against girls and women, one of the most devastating human rights violations in sub-Saharan Africa, including in her rural setting.

“When girls are out of school due to lack of fees, they start thinking about getting married or end up being abused by anyone who can give them money. This shatters their dreams, and exposes them to violence and worsened poverty,” Malaika states.

Her mother, Agnes Phiri (not her real name), hopes the scholarship will encourage the selected girls not to marry young—like her second-born, who now has four children— but rather complete secondary education, which provides them better opportunities in life.

“When my daughter got married aged 16, I blamed myself for failing to keep her in school. Since my husband died 14 years ago, I have struggled to raise five children singlehandedly,” she recounts. For the widow, the scholarship is “a prayer answered”.

“With this assistance, Malaika has no reason to rush into marriage. She is intelligent and determined to catch up with her friends and achieve her dream. Every time she was expelled from school because of our financial hardships, I couldn’t eat while she was weeping. If she stays in school and works hard, she will lift herself out of poverty and give me a hand up too.”



“The scholarship came at the right time. Every time the headteacher sent me home to collect fees, I felt sad and ashamed. I spent months not knowing where the money would come from. This support increases my chances to remain in school and achieve my dreams. I am thankful and I will show it by working harder in class,”



Generic photos used to protect Malaika’s identity.

Photo credit: Nomsa Taulo

SAVING GIRLS FROM CHILD MARRIAGES

By Faith Mvula -UNWOMEN & Mphatso Kapito-FOYODE



15- year- old Sifati Mustafa (not her real name) has big dreams-to be a pediatric nurse at Machinga District Hospital. During the time schools were closed in Malawi to reduce the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, Sifati has been desperately hoping that schools would re-open soon.

“I was in the middle of my first term in standard 7 when the government closed schools. I thought my school would reopen within a couple of weeks, but months went by and schools remained closed,” said Sifati.

Sifati and her two sisters moved to their uncle’s house after the death of their parents a few years ago. Under the care of her uncle, life was not easy for Sifati and her sisters. The girls would often eat one meal a day and Sifati would have to work long hours on farms to earn money for necessities.

Sifati, said her dream of becoming a nurse was shattered in June last year when her uncle decided that all the girls would marry.

“My uncle found men and married us off. I could not believe it. He felt he couldn’t take care of all of us. Since he depends on rain-fed agriculture, he struggles to harvest enough food for the whole year. We had no choice but to comply with his idea of marrying us off. It seems he collected some money from these men,” Sifati explains.

Sifati’s story is just the tip of the iceberg. Covid-19 is exacerbating inequalities that run deep in a largely patriarchal society.

In Malawi, statistics shows that around half of the girls in Malawi get married before their eighteenth birthday. Child marriages and teen pregnancies are common in Machinga district, with 11 percent of girls being pushed into early marriages, according to a 2016 baseline study by Plan International and Amref.

This is now changing in Machinga district, thanks to the EU

funded Spotlight Initiative. Forum for Youth Development (Foyode), through UN Women, is implementing the Spotlight Initiative to prevent early and forced marriages. Chiefs, faith leaders and other key community leaders have been trained to champion the fight against Covid-19-induced early marriages in Traditional Authority Ngokwe.

Harmful practices that violate the rights of women and girls are being challenged through community engagements. A Chiefs' platform was established whereby chiefs sensitized parents of adolescents who were married off that per the law, all child marriages are to be annulled.

Group Village Headman Kwacha, who rescued Sifati and her sisters from early marriages, has been part of a door-to-door campaign credited for decreasing child marriages in the area. Sifati was rescued through a sweeping exercise that has removed many girls from child marriages.

"When I heard about Sifati and her sister's marriages, I immediately reported the matter to the police. The Police Victim Support Unit (VSU) investigated the matter and arrested the uncle," said Group Village Headman Kwacha.

He adds, "At the VSU, the marriages were annulled, and the girls were referred to a One-Stop Centre at Machinga District for pregnancy tests, sexually transmitted infections screening, treatment and counselling".

"Most of us young girls are afraid of marrying, we just want to get an education and live independent lives" explains Sifati.

Spotlight Initiative has been empowering community leaders to take a proactive role in the welfare of vulnerable groups in the area, especially young girls.



"Most of us young girls are afraid of marrying , we just want to get an education and live independent lives"



Generic photos used to protect identity.

Photo credit: Nomsa Taulo; SI UNRCO and UNICEF

SPOTLIGHT INITIATIVE GUEST: ALEX BANDA

In this edition, SI Newsletter talks to Alex Banda, chairperson of the Spotlight Initiative Media Network. Excerpts below

SI: Tell us about yourself

AB: Alex Kulumbasi Banda is a versatile young man, ambitious, striving to always be part of the solution to social injustice in our society.

SI: Why and how did you develop a passion to report on violence against women and girls?

AB: The passion to report on GBV comes from my own experience. Growing up as a child, I witnessed GBV happening to someone so close to me. It was so bad. Constantly, I watched them go through so much pain and trauma. I felt helpless, there was nothing I could do to help. Since that time, I vowed never to see such injustice ever happen to anyone.

SI: How did the SI Media Network come about?

AB: The introduction of the flagship UN & EU Spotlight Initiative and my inclusion in the first ever meeting for orientation to the Programme by UN Resident Coordinator to Malawi Maria Jose Torres and UNDP Resident Representative Shigeki Komatsubara seemed like a break for me and a stage where I thought, my burning desire to be part of the solution to social injustice was coming to full circle. It was after the orientation that I made a proposal to form a network of journalists from the districts which were GBV hotspots to enhance awareness of GBV within the communities. The idea was accepted and here we are.

SI: How would you describe the situation in Malawi as far as VaWG is concerned?

AB: The GBV and VAWG situation in Malawi has reached crisis levels. It requires a change of approach and renewed efforts to address the problem. Government and players in the justice system need to take their gloves off and fight these social ills with bare hands. It is also time courts took lenience out of the equation when sentencing perpetrators of this evil.

SI: What role do you think the media can play in eliminating violence against women and girls?

AB: There is so much VaWG happening around that requires media to bring to the Spotlight. There are so many misconceptions due to cultural beliefs in the communities as well. The media should leverage the platforms that they have to intensify raising awareness of VaWG. This will eventually enhance behaviour change. So, the role of the media is to



inform, sensitize and educate communities about Violence against Women and Girls. We also have a role to play in providing checks and balances as well as demand accountability and transparency from duty bearers as far as issues to do with VaWG are concerned.

SI: How do you think the SI can further engage the media in ending VaWG?

AB: I believe with close coordination and support from the SI, the media can expose and report the evils of violence currently going unreported. With less financial muscle, the media is constrained to effectively investigate and ably bring to light the monster hiding in our communities.

It is even time that the team under the Spotlight Initiative Media Network be challenged to be dedicated to investigating, exposing and reporting social ills masquerading as social norms, traditions and culture to disadvantage women and girls as an implementing partner of the multi-year project.

SI: Post SI, what sustainability plans is the Network putting in place in order to continue reporting?

AB: The SI Media Network strongly believes that by the time the programme comes to an end, it will have been well technically equipped to continue raising awareness and sensitively reporting on stories on VaWG. Network members

will continue to produce programmes aimed at sensitizing communities on the need to eliminate VaWG.

SI: Any message to other media actors?

AB: We are the light in the darkness, in as far as casting shadows of GBV and VAWG is concerned in our societies. Let's bring the change to these social ills by exposing the evils of this shadow pandemic. The media has an enormous role to play in ensuring that women and girls, just like men, live in societies without fear of being the next victim of rape, emotional and physical abuse.



Top: Banda during an assignment at the UNRCO
Below: Banda with a group of Network members during a media training on Gender Related Laws in Lilongwe
Top right: Banda in the line of duty
Left: making remarks during a media tour in Dowa



This year, Malawi hosted the Africa Gender Equality Conference under the theme: Women in Leadership; achieving an equal future in a Covid-19 world. Spotlight Initiative Malawi Country Programme was the headline sponsor of the event which was officially opened by the First Lady of the Republic of Malawi, Her excellency madam Monica Chakwera. Below are some highlights of the event .



Left: The First Lady making official opening remarks at the State House. Right: UN Resident Coordinator to Malawi, Maria Jose Torres Macho makes her remarks



Left: The Second Lady of the Republic of Malawi Madam Mary Chilima, poses with delegates to the conference. Right: EU Chargé d'Affaires Aurelie Valtat during a high level panel discussion. Below left: Minister of Gender Honorable Patricia Kaliati captured during the conference. Below Right: Female artists perform during a concert to mark the end of the conference



Spotlight Initiative Malawi Country Programme missions in pictures



UN Resident Coordinator Maria Torres and SI National Coordinator Teemar Kidane take part in a youth empowerment session by Ujamaa Pamodzi in Ntchisi.



Top right: Deputy Director of Planning in the Ministry of Local Government Walusungu Kayira during a planning workshop in Mzuzu.



Left : SI Malawi Technical Team pose for a group photo during a planning meeting in Mzuzu.

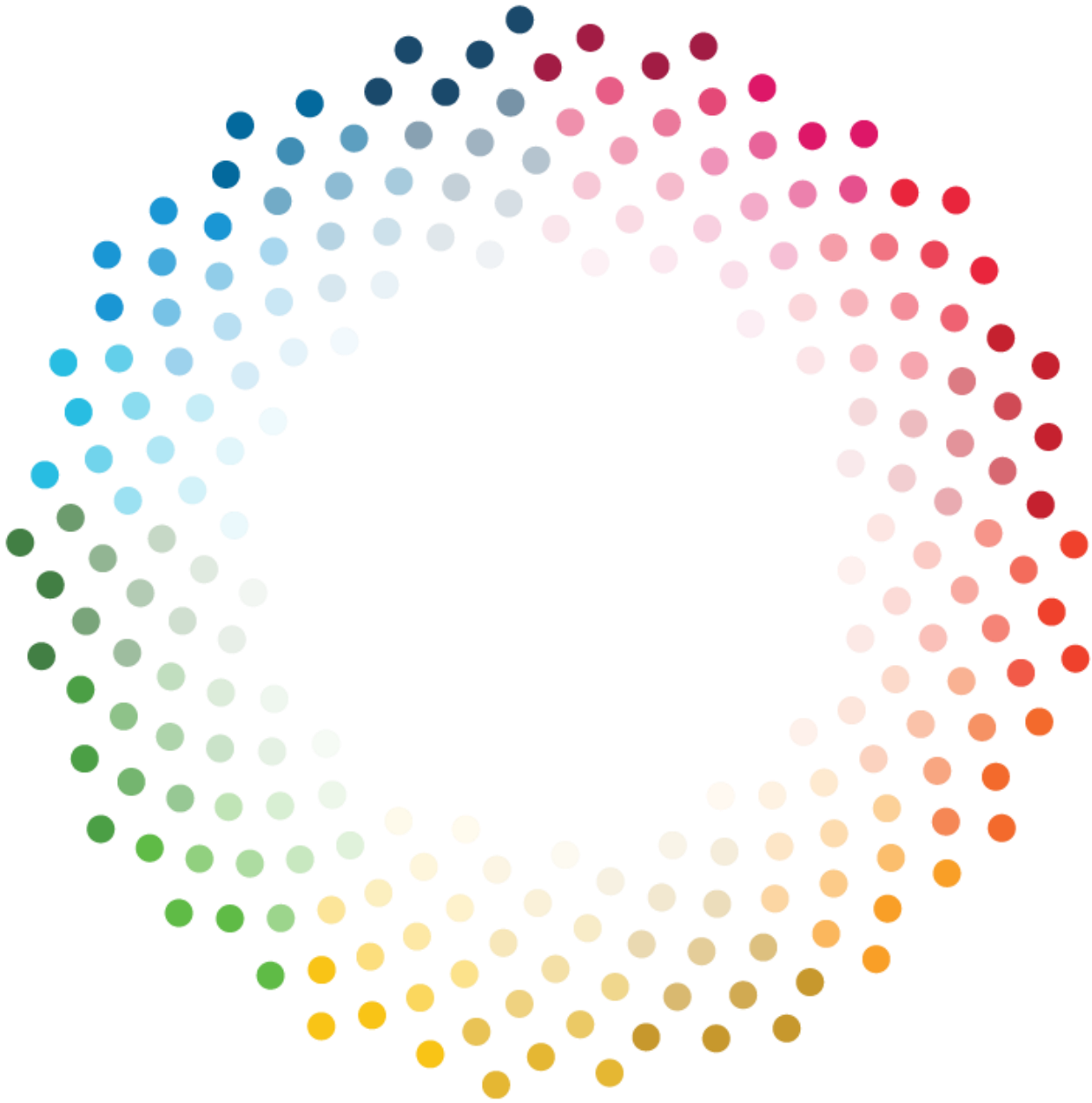
Bottom left: A warm welcome at Edingeni Headquarters in Mzimba.

Below: UN Women Deputy Country Representative Yemi Afalajayo and SI National Coordinator Teemar Kidane join a woman in Utse dance in Nsanje.

Photo credit: Africa Gender Equality Conference courtesy of For Equality.

SI Missions : Nomsa Taulo





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