

# CALL TO ACTION

Protecting young women's rights advocacy project

FINAL PROGRESS REPORT

(September 2011-August 2012)



Grant No: 3356

Project implemented by: **Girls Empowerment Network Malawi**

With support from: **Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa**



## 1.0 BACKGROUND

Eradicating violence against women and girls must be central to any discussion on social transformation and building a society based values of human dignity. The convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women (CEDAW) recognizes that Violence against women/girls inhibit women's ability to enjoy rights and freedoms on the basis equality with men/boys. In an effort to address challenges facing girls and women, and enabling them to attain a satisfying and rewarding lives, Girls Empowerment Network Malawi, with financial support from Open Society Initiative of Southern Africa (OSISA), implemented an advocacy campaign to call for action to eliminate and abolish harmful traditional practices that subject marginalized girls and women to sexual, emotional and physical abuse and violence. Over 300 girls and young women, 42 community leaders and 20,000 community members in Chiradzulo and Blantyre have been directly reached through various campaign interventions and outreach activities under a project title; **Protecting young women's rights advocacy project.**

The project targeted both community and national level policies and laws. To effect a realist change, Girls Empowerment Network recognizes the importance of girls' and women's voices and raises the profile and position of girls/women not only as victims but also as social change agents. As such the project has built local capacities and skills of grassroot girls and women as effective

advocates and activists for girls/women's rights. The project centres violence against girls and women of whatever source as a violation of human rights, including the right to young women's autonomy. After a year of engaging the young women, local leaders and community members, there has been an encouraging and a growing awareness that harmful traditional values and practices act as a root causes of discrimination and violence against girls/women. Many communities are convinced of the negative effect of these harmful practices in the lives of girls and young women as well as their families. Our campaign has contributed to the outlawing and modification of most traditional practices from 21 communities from Chiradzulo district and 7 communities from Blantyre district.

The critical component of the project included; action research, freedom parades, community leaders dialogues, national policy dialogue and debate, young women empowerment forums, policy brief and media advocacy campaign.

This report provides an outline of what has been achieved and accomplished during the reporting period.

## **2.0 PROJECT ACHIEVEMENTS AND SUCCESSES**

Overall, the campaign has been fruitful and successful with promising signs of winning the fight against harmful traditional practices including child marriage and sexual cleansing for adolescent girls during puberty. This has become evident through the development of local by-laws by community members with full support from local leadership and other key stakeholders.

The following section details and gives an analysis of program achievements made in relation to project objectives and goals and objectives of Girls Empowerment Network-Malawi as a young women rights organization.

**2.1 Project objective: To strengthen the capacity of young women to influence policy review and enforce its implementation both at local and national level.**

### 2.1.1 Training young women

The project has directly trained 40 girls and young women in Sexual Gender Based Violence (SGBV) content, advocacy, and outreach skills. The girls and young women who have received the training are now engaging in community outreach activities reaching out other girls on Sexual Gender Based violence, women's rights as human rights and recourse. Girls were trained in order for them to realize the negative effects of harmful practices such as early marriage, sexual cleansing etc and valorise their body.



The trainings were implemented in a form of training of trainers to maximize outreach. Twenty eight (28) new girls' networks with a total membership of over 600 have been established through this project.



Participating girls and young women are now engaged in the campaign against Harmful Traditional Practices and violence against girls using different strategies such as door to door, sports for social change and theatres.

Participating girls have demonstrated an improvement in knowledge and skills on young women's rights, gender and outreach skills. This has resulted in girls actively participating as activist for gender and girls' rights in their communities. Trained girls and women have successfully challenged their traditional leaders on the harmful traditional practices and violence against young women in their area. Through collaborated effort, the network girls have rescued several girls from forced child marriage which is one of the most common harmful traditional practice prevalence in all area. This is in line with GENET strategic objective of building a grass root network of girls/young women who can stand up and fight social injustices and defend the rights of girls and women and raise the profile of girls and women in their communities.

### 2.1.2 Girls “speaking out” Forum

A total of eight (8) young women discussion forums involving clusters of girls and young women networks in Chiradzulo and Blantyre were successfully conducted throughout the project period. This is in addition to the weekly meeting girls meet in their respective clubs. The forum offered an empowering opportunity for girls to explore their potentials and power within.



“Our voices do matter most incorporate them in decision making for a better Malawi, ‘nothing for us without us’ ” says one of the girl participant

During girls forum “speaking out and writing against HTP” GIRLS commit themselves to;

- Refuse and oppose Harmful Traditional Practices.

- Set up grassroot network to take initiatives and transmit relevant information that will empower the girls to campaign effectively against HTPs in particular child marriage and sexual cleansing.
- Use networks, peer groups to conduct intensive campaign against HTPS
- Lobby and advocate for the adoption of CCJPA and other girl and women friendly policies and legislation.



In addition, the forums provided an opportunity for young women to come together share, learn and energize each other which is in line with GENET strategic objective of creating spaces where girls meet and discuss about their issues and explore collective solutions. The project has to some extent increased level of participation, coordination and networking between grassroots girls and young women, in order to build increased support for girls and young women's issues which GENET's mandate.



**2.2 Project objective: To provide a platform for young women and communities to dialogue on issues that affect girls and young women.**

### 2.2.1 Action research

A participatory research activity on the prevailing HTPs was conducted in Chiradzulo district through focus group discussions and mapping approaches. During this exercise cultural and traditional practices that contribute to the vulnerability of girls and women abuses and violence were mapped out through participatory action research techniques. As part of the research process, adolescent girls also mapped their lives as a river course with many bends and narrows representing challenges they encounter as they grow up. One such story was video

documented and used as a living example of existence and evidence of the practice of harmful traditional practices in the area. "River of life" came out of a process of creating and sharing personal visual narratives that affirmed the collectiveness of abuse and trauma of the women/girls in the area. Such stories were used as entry point to engage communities about Sexual Gender Based Violence, Harmful Traditional Practices and girls'/women's rights. The journey and the telling, often for the first time, and the acknowledgement and empathy, was a gateway for community to understand the nature, causes and consequences of GBV against women; cultural, social, sexual, emotional and physical.

The results of the study were shared and disseminated to different stakeholders (both local, district and national level) to call for action to end the harmful traditional practices. (A research brief paper was produced and published in newspapers and distributed to key stakeholders.)

Dissemination of the research results provided an opportunity for young women issues be brought into national policy debate/dialogue which is one of the project objectives.

### **2.2.2 Workshop with community leaders and religious leaders.**

GENET Malawi organized series of workshop at a district level on zero tolerance to Harmful Traditional Practices with objective of building and strengthening partnerships with stakeholder. Delegates include grassroot girl's activist, traditional leaders,

religious leaders, teachers, initiators, government department's reps and other developing partners. During the workshop a gender documentary that narrates a real life experience of a girl survivor of harmful traditional practice was shown revealing the violence girls face as result of respect for tradition even when the practice is harmful. Issues of HTPs from the documentary was widely debated, discussed and reasoned.



During these interface meetings, local leaders were lobbied to develop and implement local by-laws against harmful tradition practices including child marriage and sexual related cultural practices. The process proved successful as new local by-laws has been developed. This aligns with GENET strategic objectives of promoting the role of community leaders in creating supportive environment for girls and women development. The events also

allowed GENET to promote social awareness of women's issues and their rights, and dismantle common stereotypes of women and their role in society.



At the end delegates to the workshops adopted common agendas for action to elimination of HTPs. In addition, a launching an appeal to TA to mobilize their subjects to eradicate HTPs was made.

### 2.2.3 Parade for social transformation

A community parade was conducted where over 2000 community members from over 32 communities marched a 2km journey to show solidarity, support and their commitment to stop harmful traditional practices.



The event proceeded with the signing ceremony celebrations of the newly formed by-laws that will protect girls in the area from HTPs, violence and abuse. Political leaders including Member of Parliament for the area, district commissioner, and representatives of government ministries, local leaders and civil society organizations were present. The event provided an opportunity for the community to come together for a good cause and betterment of girls and women in the area.



Chief Chitera signing the new by-laws on behalf of all the chiefs under her chieftaincy.

## **2.3 Objectives: To bring young women issues into national agendas and at policy and decision making table.**

### 2.3.1 Policy debate/dialogue.

GENET organized a policy dialogue and debate themed “how to tackle the crisis of child marriage through law reform in Malawi” that took place at kwacha conference centre in Blantyre. Delegates included representatives from ministry of gender and social welfare, judiciary, parliament, civil society organizations, traditional leaders and young women activists. The program started with highlights of the current reality of violence against girls in Malawi, sources, manifestations and negative consequences of violence against girls and young women. The policy dialogue explored tangible solutions to challenges facing girls and young women and demanded greater accountability of the state in fulfilling its international human rights and constitutional commitments and obligation. The activity was in line with GENET strategic objective of demanding accountability and ensuring that legislation, laws, policies and programmes are gender sensitive and supportive to women's rights and human rights.

Finally delegates made recommendations on the marriage bill which is expected to be tabled in the next parliamentary sitting.

The event proceeded with media discussion and interview by pressmen and women on the significant of zero tolerance to HTP

including child marriage. The event was recorded and broadcast at a public TV station (MBCTV) in a special program.

## **2.4 To influence government to review and enact a policy on harmful traditional practices.**

The following activities were executed to reach out to policy makers and bring awareness and influence for policy reform in order to eliminate violence against girls and women.

### 2.3.1 Policy brief

A policy brief on marriage law has been developed from the policy dialogue and debate with key stakeholders and has since be presented to ministry of gender through principle secretary Mary Shaba. And also it has been forwarded to the parliamentary committee on gender and to six members of parliament from the target project areas. The outcome of the policy dialogue was also presented District Executive Committees in Blantyre and Chiradzulo districts during quarterly DEC meetings.

#### 2.3.2.1 Press release

A press release was published in two major newspapers in Malawi (Weekend Nation and Malawi News) in which a call for action to policy and decision makers, to put effective measures to stop harmful traditional practices, reform marriage law and establish a human traffic law was made. This was also supported with radio and TV spots/adverts.

### 2.3.2 Press coverage

The project enjoyed massive media coverage. Through partnership with various media both print and electronic, young women issues were well covered and brought into public discourse. In most of the event the media appreciated the relevance of the issues and the dynamism of the approaches for social transformation.

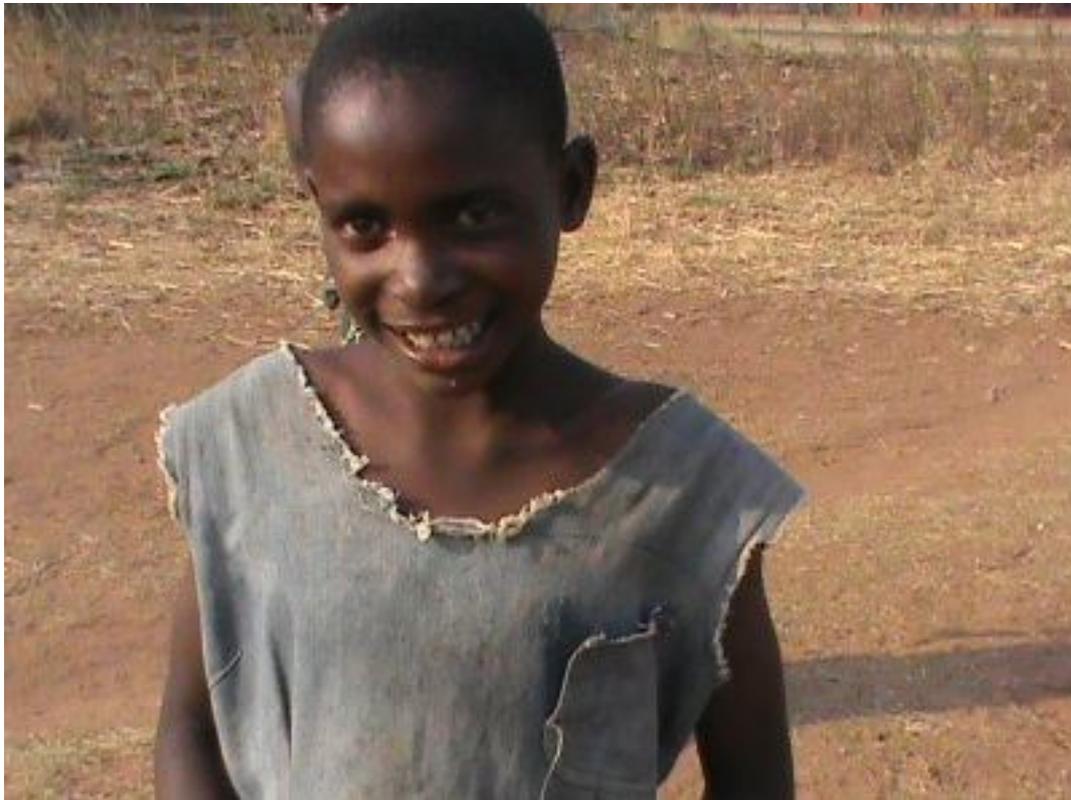
Because of massive publicity in the media, our country President her Excellency Joyce Banda recognized the work that GENET is doing in Chiradzulo. *"Ndikudziwa ntchito yayikulu mukugwira a TA chitera and ma NGO pa zauchembere wabwino"* meaning *I recognize the good work that TA Chitera and the NGOs are doing in Chiradzulo on safe motherhood."*

TA Chitera has been invited to serve in safe motherhood initiative committee. The chief confided with our field staffs during one ADC meeting that the president herself told her that she has read a lot about her work in Chiradzulo from the newspapers. This really demonstrated that our messages have been reaching key stakeholders (including policy and decision makers). Appointment of TA Chitera is a milestone in our effort. This is in line with our strategic objectives of developing the skills and competencies of women to reach decision-making levels in all spheres.



TA chitera, One of the seniour chief who is passionately fighting for girls and women's rights in her area and now she is recognized nationally as a role model leader for being the first to officially commit and develop new local by-laws. The chief encourages her subject to reason and stop negative practices such as sexual cleansing and child marriage in her area. She has opened a special fund to support girl education in her area.

## Case study 1



Elita Kachale is a 12 years old girl from Sayenda Village, TA Chitera. For her parents she is old enough to get married. She was forced to withdraw and forced to marry a man twice her age. Marriage was the only option they had thought as a better way to reduce their burden and poverty (after all her mother after all got married at a younger age as well. She was lucky that girls network from her area reported the matter to Child protection officer and to chief Chitera who directed her immediate withdraw from marriage. Having undergone pregnant test which was found negative, Elita has been rescued from early marriage and has since enrolled back to school. Chief chitera has so far fined the

parents of a girl 2 goats and the “husband” who is on the run as this report was compiled, has been fined 5 goats. Once found the man will answer the charges of defilement. Unfortunately our country’s laws does not adequately protect the girl since allows parents to give consent to girls below 16 years and it is more likely the man will walk free.

This is an example of many girls who are and will be saved through this initiative in Chiradzulo and Blantyre districts.

At a village level, a new structure/committee to look at the issue of girls and women has been established to monitor GBV issues at community level. This committee shall report directly to the TA through ADCs (Area development committees) which in turn report to the District Executive Committee (DEC).

### **Organizational Capacity Development**

Through this campaign our organization has gained public recognition and respect. During the grant period GENET Malawi GENET has been invited to serve in the following bodies and committees;

- National child protection technical working group.
- Chiradzulo district GBV technical working group as a logistic member.
- Elected in a governing body of Council for Non-governmental Organizations of Malawi (CONGOMA)

- Invited as a member of HIV/Aids Policy review team in the department of HIV/Aids and NUTRITION which is under the office of president and cabinet. (Currently we do not have a law on HIV/Aids and GENET will push for this)

This is an open opportunity for women/girls in Malawi as the voice of young women will be presented in these decision making tables. GENET will take an advantage of its presence in these tables to fight for gender sensitive and responsive legislation, laws, policies and programmes which is in line with GENET strategic objectives.

Despite the challenges encountered, we managed to do all the proposed activities.

### **Lessons learnt and way forward**

The following are what we have learnt;

- We note that policies and legislation adopted do not have the most positive impact on women and girls and survivors of SGBV.
- It was learnt that most girls are not aware of their rights, law provisions and most girls are ignorant about the functions of their bodies.
- It was also noted that rural girls/women depend on men/marriage for their survival and do not know a better alternative to marriage.

- It was learnt that rural girls in these community lack role models to learn from and are therefore trapped in the vicious cycle of poverty.
- There are no support groups for victims/ survivors of GBV and hence a need for temporally shelters for victims of GBV.
- Referral on issues of justices (victims) is problematic. Training community paralegals should be considered as one of the intervention in future.

## **Challenges**

Absence of regularly conducted national prevalence studies on sexual violence and violence against women is problematic as it makes planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of prevention and response difficult. As a result there is inadequate costing and budget allocation for the implementation of legislation such as domestic violence act. No specific budget dedicated to implement GBV prevention programmes both in national and district budget.

For good part of the year, Malawi suffered from political and economic instability which negatively affected our implementation plan. Specifically fuel shortage in the country and high inflation rate (25%) affected us negatively.

Lack of reliable transportation was also a major setback to our activities. We relied on hiring vehicle from car rentals which

proved costly and unreliable especially during the time when fuel was scarce: planning was difficult.

Referral on issues of justices (victims) is problematic. The program identified many victims who need access justice. Training community paralegals should be considered as one of the intervention area in our future project.

## **Conclusion**

These experiences demonstrate that it is possible to change attitudes and practices provided positive alternative information is given in a carefully tailored manner involving all the sector of the population. Final decision should come from within without imposition. Most leaders have given statement in support of the official declaration on zero tolerance to HTPs.

In order to reach zero tolerance to harmful tradition practices, the following propositions are made;

- Action research to identify the best approaches to specific situations with regard to traditionally condoned forms of violence.
- Intensify girl/women empowerment and involvement in education, SRHR and all areas affecting them.
- Advocate for introduction of subjects such as gender equality in schools.
- Train more local leaders on various manifestation of violence against girls/women in their communities.

- Involve communities especially girls and women groups in decision making for designing programs.
- Establish a special structure at community, district and national level to study the sources of violence, consequences and to propose effective ways to deal with the problem.
- Continue to pressure government to domesticate CEDAW, the protocol to the African charter on human and people's rights on the rights of women.

Finally the battle continues until the government and our leaders protect girls and women in law as well as in practice.

### **Attachments**

1. Activity reports
2. Policy brief
3. Local By-laws
4. Newspaper articles.
5. Video documentary
6. TV program (recorded during policy dialogue)
7. Press release
8. Financial reports
9. 2011 audit report.