

Child, Early, and Forced Marriage Success Stories



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**Breakthrough
ACTION**
FOR SOCIAL & BEHAVIOR CHANGE

ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AGYW	Adolescent Girls and Young Women
CAC	Community Action Cycle
CAGs	Community Action Groups
CEFM	Child, Early, and Forced Marriage
CRECCOM	Creative Center for Community Mobilisation
GENET	Girls Empowerment Network
GVH	Group village headman
REAL Fathers	Responsible, Engaged, and Loving Fathers program
SRH	Sexual and reproductive health
TA	Traditional Authority
VDC	Village Development Committee
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
YA for C	Youth Action for Change



This success story booklet highlights some of the achievements of the Child, Early, and Forced Marriage (CEFM) activity implemented by Breakthrough ACTION, Girls Empowerment Network (GENET) and Creative Center for Community Mobilisation (CRECCOM). It highlights stories from adolescent girls and young women whose lives have been impacted by the CEFM activity. The booklet also includes stories of religious and traditional leaders who are helping fight the practice of marrying children.

The purpose of the CEFM activity was to change the mindset of community members and spark a social movement to prevent and stop CEFM. The activity was implemented from October 2020 to September 2022. Breakthrough ACTION and its partners implemented activities for community members at several levels, including adolescents, their caregivers, and the community at large to create a supportive environment ready for change.

The project engaged adolescents through clubs, where they learned life skills as well as advocacy methods to speak up for their rights. The project engaged caregivers and parents through the Responsible, Engaged and Loving (REAL) Fathers approach, which encourages fathers to play an active role in their children's lives and emphasizes the importance of education and positive discipline. At the community level, the project implemented the Community Action Cycle (CAC); adults and youths formed 28 Community Action Groups (CAGs) and engaged in community level advocacy.

Through the CEFM project, 377 girls and 37 boys have been rescued from CEFM. We hope the stories will inspire you to take action to end child marriages.



Alfred Mang'ando
Deputy Chief of Party

Religious Leaders Commit to End Child, Early, and Forced Marriage



Reverend Misheck Mhango Credit: Breakthrough ACTION

“As faith leaders, we need an active role in ending child marriages. I have several programs targeting adolescents of different age groups, telling them about the basics of life...” - Reverend Misheck Mhango

importance of completing their studies, and dangers of early marriages.”

During the sessions, the religious leaders were taken through the statistics of child marriages in their districts and the dangers of child, early and forced marriages. Religious leaders learned that girls who complete their studies are more likely to marry later, have a higher chance of contributing to the economy, and are more financially stable. *Story continues on next page*

Some religious leaders in Malawi are helping change existing social norms in which girls are married at a very young age. The Breakthrough ACTION project has engaged religious leaders to help end CEFM in Chikwawa and Machinga.

In partnership with the district councils for Chikwawa and Machinga, Breakthrough ACTION conducted meetings with religious leaders to elicit their support. Religious leaders hold considerable power and influence on behaviors and attitudes within the community, and several religious leaders explained their role in curbing the practice.

Reverend Misheck Mhango of Assemblies of God stated, *“As faith leaders, we need an active role in ending child marriages. I have several programs targeting adolescents of different age groups, telling them about the basics of life,*

**Preventing
and Ending
Child, Early,
and Forced
Marriage**



Pastor Mitole - Church of Central Africa Presbyterian Credit: Breakthrough ACTION

“When you educate a girl, you educate the nation. This can only be done when we ensure that our children are well taken care of. This is the main reason I decided to speak out against child marriages. I usually identify role models within the church and community to talk to and motivate the youth. It is easy for someone to go for their dreams when they have someone who motivates them. I also hold sessions with both parents and the youth to educate them about the dangers of early marriages,” said Pastor Mitole, Church of Central Africa Presbyterian. Some religious leaders were already doing tremendous work in their

“When you educate a girl, you educate the nation. This can only be done when we ensure that our children are well taken care of.”
-Pastor Mitole

communities to end this practice and vowed to take even more action to make a difference. Others pledged to start talking about the dangers of child marriages in their communities.



“Before performing any Nikah ceremony, I ask for the age of the people who want to get married first.”

Sheikh Abdul-Azeez Chitalo described his efforts: “Before performing any Nikah¹ ceremony, I ask for the age of the people who want to get married first. And it is easy these days, since people have national IDs, and I simply ask to have a look at the national ID before proceeding with the ceremony. This ensures I don’t bless or conduct Nikah ceremony for people less than 18 years of age.”

¹ Nikah is the religious ceremony required by Islamic law to unite a man and woman in holy matrimony.

Sheikh Abdul-Azeez Chitalo Credit: Lusayo Banda

Saving Girls from Child, Early, and Forced Marriages in Chikwawa



Reverend Rex Mindozo - Assemblies of God Banda Credit: Lusayo Banda

She had made up her mind about the marriage. It was a very difficult time for my family. I did not want my daughter to get married at such a young age,” said Mindozo.

He says this is when he reached out to Breakthrough ACTION Community mobilizers to intervene. They sat down with both parents and the children to enlighten them about the dangers of early child marriages.

Reverend Mindozo says his daughter is now back at school, and she will be writing her primary school leaving examinations this year. He shared that his daughter aspires to go to nursing school so that she can assist people in need.

With the help of Breakthrough ACTION, Reverend Mindozo has been reaching out to his congregation and other members of the community telling them about the dangers of child marriages. He is one of the faith leaders working with Breakthrough ACTION to end child marriages in Chikwawa. The faith leader uses the pulpit to include messages on the importance of school and dangers of child marriages in his sermons.

Despite resistant from some

community members, Rev. Mindozo has forged ahead to ensure there are no more child marriages in his community. From November 2021, Reverend Mindozo has annulled nine marriages and has supported all the girls to go back to school.

Chikwawa is one of the districts with the highest prevalence of child marriages in Malawi. At least 42% of girls are married before the age of 18 and almost one in 10 married before their 15th birthday.

The District Social Welfare Officer for Chikwawa, Aaron Macheke, says poverty and cultural beliefs have contributed to the high rate of early marriages in the district. However, he is hopeful for positive change, since all stakeholders in the district are willing to work together to end this practice.

“Ending child marriages is not just the sole responsibility of the government. All concerned parties at the district and community levels need to take part so that we abolish this practice. It is good that faith leaders have now come on board. This is very commendable,” said Macheke.



Some of the religious leaders that Breakthrough ACTION is working with. Credit: Lusayo Banda

Deputy Chief of Party for Breakthrough ACTION Alfred Mang’ando, says if the nation is to win the fight against child marriages, then all sectors need to be involved. Faith leaders need to take an active role and ensure the vice is abolished in their communities.

“Faith leaders are already doing tremendous work, and they need to be supported. Many people look up to faith leaders and tend to follow what their faith leaders tell them. They are the agents of change needed to help end child marriages,” said Mang’ando. He described the faith and traditional leaders as important allies in the fight against child marriages. They can help change existing norms some of which force girls to be married off at a very young age.

Reverend Mindozo says his daughter dropped out of school to get married in August 2021. His efforts to talk to her and persuade her to focus on her studies fell on deaf ears. The challenge was that the boy’s parents allowed it, as they wanted the children to get married.

“My daughter would spend nights at the boy’s house and the parents said nothing. Though her mother and I tried to talk to her, it was all in vain.

Girls Stand up Against Child Marriages

It is a Sunday afternoon, and, one by one girls, start to gather under a tree at Bodza Primary School grounds in Traditional Authority Ngabu in Chikwawa district. Their ages range from 12 to 19. Once about 20 girls have gathered, one stands to offer an opening prayer before they burst into a song and a dance. Immediately after the song, another girl, their leader, stands up to introduce the issues for discussions on the day.

“Today we will discuss some of the challenges we are facing as youth, especially us as girls,” she announces, calling out forced marriages and challenges affecting their education.

Welcome to the Tigwirane Manja Club meeting spot. Tigwirane Manja is a girls’ club established by Breakthrough ACTION in Malawi through GENET to provide a safe space for girls to share how they are handling life challenges and gain skills to address these challenges.

“We usually meet on Sunday afternoon to share experiences faced

during the week and how each one of us approached the issues or challenges she faced. That way, we are learning from each other,” explains Margret Symon, one of the club members.



*Tigwirane Manja Girls Club meeting
 Credit: Lusayo Banda*

Having the issue of child marriage as part of the agenda on this day was surprising. CEFM is a common problem in Chikwawa, just like in many districts of Malawi, but community members do not often raise the issue for discussion or prioritize it during these gatherings.

Breakthrough ACTION Malawi and GENET are working to strengthen collaboration amongst key players to change this. Girls are key assets in reaching out to fellow girls.

“We are more into preventive activities. We are doing more of meeting with girls, traditional

leaders, Community Action Groups, Mother Groups, and other structures to sensitize them on the need to respect girls by not forcing them into early marriages,” explains Chimwemwe Reuben, a girl leader for the club.

As the adage testifies, prevention is better than cure. However, the girls assert that even in situations where a problem has occurred or threatens to occur, the girls move in to assist the girl who is the victim. So far, the Tigwirane Manja Girls Club, with support from the CAGs and traditional leaders, has facilitated the return of four girls who were forced into early marriages to their homes. The club did not stop there; it also arranged the return of all the four girls to Bodza Primary School.

Most of the girls, the Girls Club notes, are forced into marriages because of the challenges they are facing including perceived irrelevance of girls’ education among parents.

“We have noted that most of the parents do not regard education for girls as important. As a result, they rarely support a girl who wants to continue with her education,” adds

Chimwemwe.

In situations where the Girls Club has noted this neglect in a household, a home visit is arranged where the girls engage the parents and educate them on the importance of their daughter’s schooling and its long-term impact. *“This approach,”* adds Chimwemwe, *“is crucial, as the girls have noted another challenge of retention. The challenge has been that even when we facilitate a girl’s return to school, the problems that drove her out of school are still there in her parents’ house. This then forces the girl out of school again. We are working to deal with the root cause and not the symptoms of the problem.”*

For the past year, Breakthrough ACTION has worked in Malawi in its Traditional Authorities Makhuwira and Ngabu in Chikwawa and Nyambi and Kawinga in Machinga to end CEFM and other related challenges through various approaches. Girls Clubs have proven to be a key and successful strategy.

CEFM Project Empowers Youth to Help Youth



Youth Action for Change from Chikwawa district. Credit: Breakthrough ACTION

The primary victims of CEFM are youth, especially girls. Youth should, therefore, be at the core of the fight. To do this, Breakthrough ACTION partnered with and supported youth clubs and networks to raise awareness among their peers in Malawi and engaged them in the efforts to end CEFM.

Youth Action for Change, referred to in short as YA for C, is one organization born out of the efforts by Breakthrough ACTION in Malawi to use youth power in fighting

Located in the Traditional Authority (TA) Makhuwira in Chikwawa, YA for C focuses on issues such as child protection, sexual and reproductive health (SRH), and HIV.

“We are in the forefront fighting child marriages, one of the problems that the youths are facing here,” explains Andrew Henry, YA for C Executive Director.

“Child or early marriages are a serious problem here. Imagine, as of today, in collaboration with CAGs and other stakeholders we have not

only assisted in dissolving 51 marriages and out of these 31 girls have gone back to school. In addition, we have also facilitated the return to school of 35 girls and 21 boys,” adds Henry.

YA for C was established in June 2021 with support from Breakthrough ACTION in Malawi and GENET. The leadership of the youth organization, which is composed of representatives from active youth clubs, underwent training in various areas such as youth engagement, income-generating activities, and planning. YA for C is one of the four youth led organizations established with support from Breakthrough ACTION in Chikwawa and Machinga districts.

Empowered by the skills and knowledge acquired through these trainings, the YA for C team shows determination in fighting the challenges that youth are facing.

“Since we are also young, and we know the challenges fellow youths are facing, we know why Breakthrough ACTION Malawi engaged us. The idea was to send us to reach out to fellow youths. You know it is easier to catch a thief if you send a thief,” says Henry.

YA for C also engaged health workers at the Makhuwira Health Center to create a youth-friendly centre where the youths do not need to queue with the rest of the community members when accessing SRH services.

With the friendly environment created at Makhuwira Health Centre, the youth in this area freely access the facility when they need services related to sexual reproductive health and other issues. YA for C has also implemented a reporting center.

“One thing we have achieved is openness amongst the youths. Today, they can freely come to report any abuse they notice and we refer such reports to child protection worker to take appropriate action,” says Mercy Malola, one of the organization’s members.

“We are in the forefront fighting child marriages, one of the problems that the youths are facing here,”
- Andrew Henry

Chiefs at the Forefront of Advocating for an End to Child Marriages



Machinga traditional leaders Credit: Breakthrough ACTION

ACTION project, traditional leaders hope to contribute to efforts to ending this harmful practice. The Breakthrough ACTION project works with communities to learn the risks of early marriage and change the social norms that promote this practice. Traditional leaders are in positions of influence, and community members rely on their guidance.



Rosemary Nawasha, Machinga District Commissioner
 Credit: Breakthrough ACTION

More than 20 traditional leaders have vowed to end child, early, and forced marriages in Machinga, where child marriage remains widespread. In 2021, Machinga registered 435 cases of child marriages, of which 225 involved girls below the age of 15.

Evidence world over has shown that girls under 18 years old are not ready to become wives and mothers and are more susceptible to domestic violence. Child marriages increase the risk of early pregnancy which can lead to complications during pregnancy and childbirth, and maternal mortality. Girls who marry early often drop out of school and miss out on life skills to become economically productive adults. With support from the Breakthrough

District Commissioner for Machinga, Rosemary Nawasha, has commended the efforts of traditional leaders in joining the fight to end child marriage in the district. She says traditional leaders must take a leading role in keeping girls in school.

“When chiefs give a directive that certain things should not happen in their community, people comply. The same goes for child marriages.”

If chiefs are in the forefront advocating for an end to child marriages, then most likely this practice will come to an end,” says Nawasha.

“When chiefs give a directive that certain things should not happen in their community, people comply. The same goes for child marriages.” -
 Rosemary Nawasha

She adds that chiefs are the custodians of cultural practices, and their commitment to becoming champions of ending child marriage is a step in the right direction.



Senior Chief Nyambi, Machinga
 Credit: Breakthrough ACTION

Senior Chief Nyambi is one of the key leaders spearheading the fight against child marriage in the district. Nyambi has instituted

by-laws banning child marriage in his area and requires all children below the age of 18 to attend school.

“Some parents and children are complying with the bylaws, and I’m hoping we will see an improvement in ending child marriages. Marrying at an early age can have a devastating impact on a child’s life and it should be avoided at all costs,” says Senior Chief Nyambi.

TA Liwonde is also another traditional leader committed to ending child marriage in his area. He said that equipping chiefs with the right messages and skills will go a long way in ending child marriage. *“As chiefs, we need to be at the forefront to end this harmful practice,”* says TA Liwonde, adding that the chief’s forum will play a key role in ensuring all villages are reached with child marriage messages.

REAL Fathers Initiative Restores Happiness and Sanity in Chikwawa District



Everson and Esther Charles family Credit: Lusayo Banda

Everson Charles (38 years old) comes from Zing'ando village, Group village Headman Jana, Traditional Authority Makhwira in Chikwawa district. He is married to Esther (35 years old) and together they have four children (two boys and two girls). He earns a living from farming, growing maize, beans, potatoes and rice. Everson is a success story to his family as well as the community. He is a REAL Father who has a vision for his family and community, he supports his wife and children financially, morally as well

as emotionally and champions development activities in the area. This is a big transformation and all attributed to the success of the REAL Fathers program under the USAID-funded Breakthrough ACTION CEFM project. Everson joined REAL Fathers after being approached by Village Development Committee (VDC) members for the area, who identified him as one of the potential participants and beneficiary when they got an overview of the interventions of the project during entry meetings. VDC members were

asked to identify fathers who could join the initiative based on some set criteria.

They challenged him and other men to join the child protection focused project that seeks to spark a social movement against child and early marriages and help children and adolescent realize their dreams.

Prior to Everson joining the REAL Fathers, he was well known in the community for all the wrong reasons causing troubles for his family members as well as his village. He used to be a drunk with no respect for his wife; he would beat both her and the children for no reason. He was also neglecting his roles as father and breadwinner. He did not provide for the children despite getting money from farming.

His children would miss classes because of lack of scholastic materials, while he used all the proceeds from farming on beer and other women.

“Although I used to get a lot of money from farming, no penny was spent on my family, as I could misuse all

proceeds on beer and women, my kids were not going to school due to lack of scholastic materials. When drunk, I could shout at people in the village and engage in fights,” said Everson.

At the first meeting mentors informed Everson and other fathers how they would take part in the activities of the initiative through biweekly group meetings with their mentor where they would tackle different topics from the REAL Fathers curriculum. They also learned that each group meeting would be followed by a home visit where the mentor would assess whether the participants have been applying what they had covered.

Everson's life and the whole family transformed after attending REAL Fathers group dialogue sessions together with his wife. Going through topics like “vision and values for my family,” Everson realized that as a father, he had a very big role of supporting the family as well as guiding his children on the best way to live. Story continues on next page



Everson, left, with his mentor Mlenga
Credit: Lusayo Banda

He learned that fulfilling one's vision and dreams requires discipline and overcoming some obstacles in life. He also realized that both his male and female children were to be treated the same and given similar household chores despite some gender differences. He also understood the importance of supporting his wife and planning together to achieve their goals and also for those of their children.

Everson is now able to show love for his family by having quality time with the wife and children. He is able to use positive discipline measures for correcting his children when they have gone wrong, he stopped drinking, and he ended all the secret affairs. Every time he gets money from farming, he plans together with the wife on how best to use the available finances to support the family.

His wife said, *"My husband wasn't caring, and he couldn't provide for the family, our children were not going to school as he was not paying fees for them, now things have changed, he's now a transformed man."*

Everson managed to complete all seven REAL Father modules sessions and graduated as a REAL Father during a colorful graduation ceremony conducted in their area.

"Now am able to support my family and my kids are going to school without any problem",
- Everson.

Mlenga, Everson's mentor said, *"We targeted Everson because he was very troublesome and he was causing problems in the area, as well as at his home. Now he's a reliable and very supportive husband. I am recommending that he officially becomes a mentor and support other men."*

Everson's family has been transformed totally because of the REAL Fathers' initiative, he and other graduates are now working with VDC members in providing support to other men in the area on how they can also be transformed and join the work of reducing CEFM in the area.

"A REAL Father has a vision for his family and community; he supports his wife and children financially, morally as well as emotionally, and champions development activities in the area."
- Mlenga



Meet Some of the **Girls Rescued** **from Early Marriages**

All girls wish to enjoy their adolescence. However, this is not the case for many girls in Malawi, which records one of the highest child marriage rates in Africa at 42 %. Most girls are married before their 18th birthday, and 9 % are married before their 15th birthday. However, the narrative is slowly changing. Girls are leaving these marriages and getting a second chance at fulfilling their dreams.

Former Child Bride Returns To School



Maness and her mother. Credit: Lusayo Banda

At the age of 15, Maness had to bear a burden people far older than her struggle with—parenting a newborn with barely any family support.

When Maness’s parents found out that she was pregnant, they forced her to marry the baby’s father who, like Maness, was only an adolescent himself. Without a source of income, the young couple had to rely on the boy’s parents for food and other necessities.

“It was hard juggling being a wife and an adolescent. I was told that I was now a grown woman. I had to do all the cooking and take care of the house and my in-laws,” says Maness.

Although she longed to return to her parents, Maness did not reach out to them for fear they would reject her.

“I was called all sorts of names, made fun of by my peers, and rejected by my own family when I got pregnant.”

Fortunately, Maness’s story reached Jana, the Group Village Head, and a strong advocate for ending child marriages. Jana shared what was happening to Maness with a CAG. The group then met with Maness’s parents to talk to them about the dangers of early marriage.

After several meetings, Maness’s parents agreed to let her come home and promised to look after her and the baby. A few months later, the boy’s family moved to another district, and they have not heard from him since. Now, Maness relies solely on her parent’s support. Even with her parents’ help, life is still challenging for Maness.



Maness before leaving for school
Credit: Lusayo Banda

“It was hard juggling being a wife and an adolescent. I was told that I was now a grown woman. I had to do all the cooking and take care of the house and my in-laws,” - Maness

Maness’s day starts at 5 a.m. As soon as she wakes up, she helps with household chores such as fetching water, washing plates, and sometimes cooking porridge for her siblings when they have maize flour. She must perform all these chores before she leaves for school.

While she is at school, Maness’s mother watches her own three-year-old child in addition to Maness’s baby. She hopes Maness will focus on her studies and help provide for the family in the future.

Maness is determined to complete her studies; she knows her education will help her contribute to her family.



Brandina Tonekaesi,
17 years old,
from Chikwawa

Brandina Tonekaesi Credit: Lusayo Banda

“I thought marriage was the best option for me to live a better life. But I was wrong.” - Brandina

Brandina says life was tough at home. Her family could barely afford two meals a day.

She got married at the age of 15. However, marriage was not what she perceived it to be. Instead of solving her problems, it created more problems for her. She eventually stopped going to school and started working to make a little money. That is when she realized that she was better off at her mother’s house.

A year later, Breakthrough ACTION-trained local community mobilizers heard about her story. They reached out to Brandina, her husband, and both parents. The community mobilizers told them about the effects of child marriage, and that child marriages are illegal.

Brandina returned home to her mother and went back to school. She is now in Standard 6 and aspires to be a pastor when she completes her studies.

**Flora Ibrahim,
15 years old,
from Machinga**

“I want to help other girls stay in school and complete their studies.” - Flora

Flora is a Standard 7 student at Malundani Primary school in Machinga. A few months ago, Flora was in an abusive marriage. Breakthrough ACTION-trained local community mobilizers helped her leave the marriage and return to school where she aspires to be a nurse.

When she first married, Flora says her husband treated her like a princess, but things turned ugly within a few months of the marriage.

“It was not my wish to get married, but circumstances beyond my control forced me into the marriage. I thought it would be happily ever after, but I was wrong. I wanted to go back home and continue with my studies,” says Flora.

She encourages young girls to focus on their studies and not rush into marriage. She says education is the key for girls to stand up for themselves and prevent abuse.

Amidst Neglect, Marita Vows to Fight on



Marita and her father Mr. Julius Credit: Lusayo Banda

Marita Julius has always harbored the dream of becoming a nurse one day. The fire of that dream is still blazing despite numerous challenges threatening to end the dream in its infancy.

The 16-year-old Marita is currently in Standard 6 at Mbesa Primary School, a class she returned to after she was withdrawn from marriage.

“Yes, I want to become a nurse,” she

confirms, before adding, *“and I know that with determination, I can actually achieve this goal.”*

Just like almost all girls in her home area, TA Ngabu, accessing education is a challenge. Most households are suffering from poverty and lack necessities. Marita’s household is not spared. With no school uniform or writing materials, coupled with going to school on an empty stomach, most families decide to marry off their daughters as an easier option. Even in situations where the families do not

want their children to marry, girls often find their way into early marriages.

“I lacked virtually everything. I would not say my father could not afford the basics for my education. It was mainly due to lack of interest to support my education.”

She continues, *“I had no shoulder to lean on even though my parents were still alive. In fact, they never had time to sit down and chat with me about my dreams and aspirations. Whenever I asked for anything like clothes, school materials and other necessities, they never showed interest,”* she recalls.

Due to their indifference to their daughter’s education, absenteeism was never discouraged.

“Eventually, I thought going to stay with my boyfriend was a better option,” says Marita.

One evening, the young girl walked several kilometers to her boyfriend’s home to start her new life as a wife.

“I was warmly welcomed by both my boyfriend and his parents. The immediate feeling was that this was

the life I wanted,” Marita recalls.

Initially, the young girl thought getting married would mean all her problems would vanish automatically. Within a month, Marita realized reality ran counter to her expectations.

The problem of lack of necessities she thought she had escaped by leaving her parents’ home were even worse living with her boyfriend and his family.

“Apart from these challenges, I was also overworking as I was doing almost all the work at the house,” she remembers.

News of Marita abandoning education for marriage reached Breakthrough ACTION. Breakthrough ACTION Malawi is working closely with CRECCOM in TAs Makhuwira and Ngabu in Chikwawa district to, among other things, fight child, early and forced marriages through various efforts including partnering with communities, and empowering caregivers, adolescent girls, and young men. Story continues on next page



Marita Julius Photo by Lusayo Banda

better skills to be learned elsewhere. He married off his first born, a girl, when she was 16 and in Standard 3. Her achievement of Standard 3 was only due to the persistence her mother, Julius' wife.

"My wife is the one who always pushed to ensure the girls are in school. I never gave it a thought whether they go to school or not. I felt marrying them off was better because it meant they will have someone to take care of them," he narrates. Julius felt that it was a "waste" his money on building a future for his children through education. Citing poverty, Julius says, for him, priority was finding food for the day and not ensuring that his children were in school.

"I used to struggle then and I still struggle to fend for my family. But giving an opportunity to my children to be in school was never in my mind," he admits.

Contact with the REAL Fathers mentor and joining the REAL Fathers group helped change his way of thinking.

The REAL Fathers program brings together small groups of fathers, and

after a few weeks of meeting, their wives as well, to discuss issues such as education and the importance of keeping girls in school. The program also provides skills for positive discipline and making joint decisions as a family.

As a REAL Father, Julius was encouraged to facilitate the return of his daughter to Mbesa, the primary school that Marita abandoned. A mentor father accompanied Julius to Marita's new home, and with the challenges Marita was facing as a wife, it did not take much effort to secure her return home. The mentor father accompanied Julius as he met the headteacher at the primary school who enrolled Marita back in school.

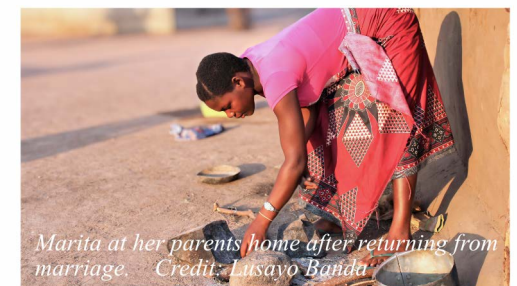
"I am still facing the challenges now but not as serious as they were before I withdrew from school. My father is now very supportive. He is trying hard to ensure that I have the necessities for my education unlike in the past. He even shows interest in my schoolwork these days," she adds.

The change in behavior from Marita's father is encouraging and shows the impact that the REAL Fathers program can have. Being a REAL Father means he has embraced the

principles of the program, which encourages fathers to support their families in all aspects of life and value a girl worth the same as a son's. Julius did not stop here. He continues this work—identifying fellow men who are in the habit that he had of neglecting their children's education.

"Right now, I get involved in mentoring other fathers. I reach out to them with messages of encouragement. I talk to them on the importance of working hard to ensure that their families are taken care of," - Julius, the mentor father

With support from her parents, Marita's dream of becoming a nurse one day is truly revived.



Marita at her parents home after returning from marriage. Credit: Lusayo Banda

Helping Girls Defy the Odds

Poverty is one of the contributing factors forcing young girls into early marriages in Malawi. Parents and sometimes girls see marriage as one way to deal with their family's financial problems and gain financial security. However, reality has proven otherwise, and some girls are starting to defy the odds by ending their marriages and returning to school.

Breakthrough ACTION's CEFM project has engaged community mobilizers and Community Action Groups (CAGs) to help prevent and annul child marriages in their communities. Breakthrough ACTION has also engaged girls' clubs to motivate young girls to focus on their studies and avoid early marriages.

A Child Bride's Journey to Reclaim Her Future

Soon after she got pregnant, Esnart Kazembe, dropped out of school at age 17. Esnart's story is far from rare in Malawi, where 42 percent of girls are married by 18, with nine



*Some of the girls rescued from early marriages (Esnart on the left and Rahat in the middle)
 Credit: Lusayo Banda*

percent married before their 15th birthday. Esnart's tragic story started out as a fairy tale. She was in Form 3 when she met the truck driver. He was very supportive and provided for all her school needs without asking for anything in return. Eventually, the truck driver—who was twice Esnart's age—confessed his love for her. Blinded by his affection, Esnart fell for him. And because he had already done so much for her, she felt obliged to return the favor.

"We were so happy, and I never lacked anything. I used to spend most of my time with this man and ended up losing focus on my studies. Before I knew it, I was pregnant by him," confessed Esnart. Esnart's pregnancy was unwelcome news to her parents. However, there was not much they could do as Esnart was adamant about getting married to the man she thought was the love of her life.

A few months into the marriage, cracks started to emerge. Esnart would go to bed on an empty stomach. A caring act of asking about her husband's whereabouts was rewarded with a slap. Life became even more unbearable for her and her baby when her husband took a second wife.

The situation seemed hopeless until she attended a meeting organized by a CAG to encourage young women and girls—married or not—to go back to school.

During the meeting, Esnart experienced a moment of clarity about her future. *"It hit me so hard that I had ruined my future all for nothing. That was when I gathered the courage to ask for help,"* recalls Esnart. She told her story to one of the CAG members, who promised to intervene in her issue. Earlier this year, with the support and guidance of CAG members, Esnart

ended her marriage, returned to her parent's house, and re-enrolled in Form Three at Malundani Community Day Secondary School. Juggling school and motherhood has been hard, but Esnart is determined to complete her studies. Her dream is to become a secondary school teacher one day.

Since 2021, the CAG has rescued 28 girls, like Esnart, from early marriages. Twenty-four of those girls have since re-enrolled in school. According to Symon Mkwezalamba, the secretary of the CAG, the group has been reaching out to girls in the community who have been forced into early marriages. The group has also been working with traditional and religious leaders to encourage people to abandon some of the cultural practices that contribute to school dropouts among girls.

Mkwezalamba is optimistic about ending child marriage in Malawi. *"There is still a bit of resistance from some community members, but [I] am sure with the right approach, we can win this fight,"* says Mkwezalamba.

Fighting Early Marriages through Youth Clubs



Marrying off girls to older men was a norm in TA Nyambi in Machinga. Many parents wished their daughters could be married to these men so that they can benefit from them financially.

This practice forced many girls into early marriages and skyrocketed teen pregnancies, killing the dreams and aspirations of many young girls.

According to Ringster Nkhoma, Child Protection Worker in TA Nyambi, parents in the area arranged marriages for their children without their consent. At times, girls would marry their husbands *in absentia*, that is, blessing the wedding without

the groom's presence.

"We had cases where parents would arrange a marriage with a man in South Africa and command their daughter to leave their home and wait for a man for years at his parents' home," said Nkhoma.

He said this practice, apart from posing a threat to a girl child, also contributed to cases of girls dropping out of school because of early pregnancies and early marriages.

The situation is slowly changing in the area. Parents are now scared to marry off their girl children due to the presence of active and vibrant

youth clubs in the area.

Through a USAID-funded Breakthrough ACTION project on CEFM, many youth clubs have been established as part of the efforts to end early marriages and teen pregnancies in the area.

Through the clubs, youth take to task any parent believed to have forced a girl child into marriage by reporting them to police and relevant authorities.

"What we want is for girls to continue with school and help transform this area. We are tired of child marriages and early pregnancies."

-Thomas Fryson

"What we want is for girls to continue with school and help transform this area. We are tired of child marriages and early pregnancies," said Thomas Fryson, a member of Nyambi youth club.

Elita Chapola, another Member of Nyambi youth club, hailed Breakthrough ACTION for establishing the youth clubs that have helped to build trust amongst the youth and

provided a platform for youths to speak out and act.

"We feel more enlightened and empowered to fight early marriages and teen pregnancies. We will continue the fight until there are zero child marriages in TA Nyambi," added Chapola.

"What is more exciting is seeing the active participation of the youth who are championing issues of child marriages and early marriages. They all seem to speak with one language and have a common goal which is to protect girl children," said Nkhoma.



Adolescent Girl's and Young Women's Clubs in Session



In addition to engaging the youth, Breakthrough ACTION has also assisted in strengthening community structures that are also playing an important role in the fight against child marriages.



Girl leaders conducting a session with their peers. Breakthrough ACTION is supporting girl leaders to conduct mentorship and club activities. Topics focus on building self-esteem, gender norms and stereotypes, gender-based violence, and sexual and reproductive health.

“We feel more enlightened and empowered to fight early marriages and teen pregnancies. We will continue the fight until there are zero child marriages in TA Nyambi.”
- Chapola

Training session for girl leaders and mentors. Girl leaders and mentors develop action plans and engage community leaders in Chikwawa and Machinga to support adolescent girls' and young women's (AGYW's) empowerment initiatives and support girls in ending early marriages in their communities.



This booklet of success stories is made possible by the generous support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The contents are the responsibility of Breakthrough ACTION and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.

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