

## MALAWI » Ending child marriage and protecting girls' rights

*Child marriage constrains girls' opportunities in many respects, resulting in a higher likelihood of leaving school early, of physical and mental ill-health, of income poverty and of intimate partner violence. Despite declines in child, early, and forced marriage, globally 19 per cent of women aged 20-24 in 2022 had been married before age 18. In Malawi, the rate is still twice as high – 38 per cent in 2020 (latest data available) – despite a significant fall from 48 per cent in 2018. Feminist and girls' rights actors in Malawi have been at the forefront of local and national advocacy to challenge social norms, secure buy-in from local leaders, and change legislation in order to achieve the progress to date.*

### Change at the local level

Local activists, together with NGOs and UN agencies, have actively worked to address the high rates of child marriage in Malawi, especially since the early 2000s. This period also saw an increase in community bylaws related to child marriage alongside national government action prioritizing maternal health and girls' education.

The creation of community bylaws – local rules and norms defined and enforced by communities and traditional and local leaders – has been a common approach in Malawi to address issues from natural resource management to education to adolescent health. Bylaws relating to child marriage can require men who marry girls under the age of 21 to give up their land in the village and/or pay a penalty of goats or chickens and can impose social sanctions on parents who allow the marriage of their underage daughters.



**When I go and talk to a girl and ask her, “Do you know your human rights compared to how it was maybe 10 years ago?” She says yes...Now, they say they want to be doctors and teachers.**

— Joy Hayley Munthali, Co-Executive Director, Green Girls Platform

In some cases, the establishment of bylaws has come from direct advocacy by feminist actors and girl advocates. In 2011, the Girls Empowerment Network (GENET) and Rise Up launched the Stop Child Marriage campaign. Girls participating in the campaign in Chiradzulo district successfully lobbied 60 village chiefs to enact bylaws related to child marriage, supported by local civil society including GENET.

Continuous engagement between local feminist and girls' rights actors and local systems of power has been

critical. The engagement of traditional leaders as champions has been particularly effective in some communities. For example, local leader Chief Kachindamoto annulled around 3,500 child marriages in central Malawi and continues to campaign

around the country to end child marriage. Chief Kapoloma has championed girls' education in southern Malawi; he claimed to have seen a reduction in local child marriages from 10 to 15 each year, to just two in 2017.

### The continued role of feminist and girls' rights actors



**Poverty and financial stability are major drivers of child marriage. If a family is very poor, girls are married off because their families see it as one less thing to worry about. Girls are removed from poverty and given a net of safety in marriage.**

— Immaculate Maluza, Human Rights Lawyer and Gender Activist

In 2015, President Mutharika signed the Marriage, Divorce and Family Relations Act, raising the legal age of marriage to 18, and in 2017 some feminist actors were instrumental in efforts to secure alignment within the Constitution of Malawi itself.

These national-level successes are significant, and community bylaws continue to be impactful in reducing child marriage. At the same time, feminist actors interviewed for this research highlighted the continued need to address underlying social norms and the root causes of child marriage, many

of which have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change such as school closures, forced displacement, and loss of livelihoods. Local entities supporting bylaw enforcement have also reported challenges including "lack of support from police, cultural beliefs and practices, lack of knowledge regarding the legal marriageable age, and false reporting of children's ages".

These challenges – and the continued high rates of child marriage in Malawi despite recent declines – demonstrate the critical ongoing role of feminist and girls' rights actors, especially at the local level where education and community engagement can be so effective. Feminist actors interviewed for this research stressed the need for more and better resources to keep this work going and to continue to reduce child marriage rates in every community across Malawi.



**Even child marriage is a feminist and political issue – it concerns the right to your body, to decide who you should be with, and to sexual pleasure. The feminist movement in Malawi, especially the young feminist movement and the grassroots movements, for me, are our hope. Except they are not given enough resources.**

— Anonymous