



**MALAWI GIRL GUIDES ASSOCIATION**  
**CHANGING TIDES: PEOPLE, CULTURES AND VALUES**





## MISSION

‘To enable girls and young women (3 to 25 years) to develop socially, emotionally, physically, mentally, spiritually, economically and culturally so that they become responsible citizens of Malawi.’

## VISION

‘A population of Malawian girls and young women that is empowered to realise their fullest potential as responsible citizens of the country.’

## MANDATE

‘Offering opportunities to girls and young women to develop character, become responsible citizen and give services in their communities’

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## Introduction

The Malawi Girl Guides Association (MAGGA) is the largest voluntary movement dedicated to girls and young women in the country. Working in 24 districts, the diverse Movement represents the population of adolescent girls and young women in Malawi who form 51 % of the total population. For more than 20 years, Girl Guiding has transformed the lives of girls and young women in the country, supporting and empowering them to achieve their fullest potential and become responsible citizens. Through innovative non-formal education programmes, leadership development, advocacy work and community action, MAGGA empowers girls and young women to develop the skills and confidence needed to make positive changes in their lives, their communities and the Country. MAGGA serve marginalized adolescent girls and young women 3 to 25 years of age.

### The Safeguard Young People programme

MAGGA, with technical and financial support from the United Nations Population fund (UNFPA) is implementing the Safeguard Young People programme (SYP) which aims to empower adolescents and young people aged 10 to 24 years to lead healthy lives and to protect themselves from sexually transmitted infections, including HIV, unintended pregnancies, unsafe abortions, early marriages, gender-based violence and harmful cultural practices. At the same time, SYP promotes inclusiveness, gender equitable norms and protective behaviour. Through the program, the Ministry of youth has spearheaded the development of CSE materials to be used to ensure the outcomes of the programme are achieved.

Implemented in partnership with traditional leaders, the young people themselves, mother groups, district youth offices, traditional initiators, education authorities and guide leaders, the SYP has proven that the scientifically accurate, age-appropriate, culturally and gender-sensitive and life skills-based knowledge equips the youth with skills and efficacy to make informed decisions about their sexuality and lifestyle. The adolescents are put in an informed position, where they are able to avoid unwanted pregnancies and are better equipped to face other challenges in life, including peer pressure, during the transition period from childhood to adulthood.

Research has consistently proven that comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) can help young people delay sexual activity, reduce their number of sexual partners, and increase protective sexual behaviour. Young people who receive accurate, unbiased information through CSE are better able to develop health promoting life skills, understand and promote gender equality, realize their SRH rights, and demand high quality SRH services.

While Positive perceptions an SYP study that was conducted by UNFPA indicated that the vast majority (89%) of survey respondents reported that they were glad they had gone for initiation, where they reported to have gained new knowledge from the counseling, 44% of initiates reported negative experiences during initiation ceremonies. Qualitative data show that forced sex may not be the direct result of initiation counseling but a result of post-initiation celebrations conducted in secluded places where alcohol, music, and dancing are common place.

The SYP is hence implemented in line with recommended of the SYP study that was carried in Chikwawa (Sena and Nyanja ethnic groups), Chiradzulu (Lomwe), Dedza (Ngoni), Mchinji (Chewa), Mangochi (Yao), and Nkhata Bay (Tonga and Tumbuka) which gave guidelines of appropriate and targeted interventions to safeguard young people in Malawi.

Documentation of the SYP was conducted to understand the changing tides in traditional cultural practices when conducting initiation ceremonies following the introduction of CSE at the initiation camps and how this is promoting young people's Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) in the exercise of their human rights.

While the SYP study established that initiation is by far the most common of the cultural practices conducted to mark the transition from childhood to adulthood, and that the potential for harms to the young people's human rights and SRH varies according to the specific initiation practice, which in turn is related to ethnicity.

It was worth understanding how the SYP has assisted in the adoption of CSE at initiation which typically occurs at puberty, when a young girl has begun to menstruate and grow breasts and a young boy has begun to notice changes in his body, such as pubic hair, a deeper voice, and wet dreams. While the average age for attending initiation is 11.9 counseling on the passage to adulthood is a key aspect of initiation ceremonies, the SYP study findings suggest that efforts to safeguard young people should take variation across ethnicities and type of ceremony into account.

With a minority of those who had been initiated suggested changes in the initiation practices; these corresponded to the negative experiences of some respondents, particularly bullying and physical actions such as slapping and pinching. Obscene language, especially explicit language used in initiation songs, was also disliked by these respondents. While forced sex was rarely reported as part of initiations, and counselors often advised initiates to wait until marriage for sexual intercourse.

For some ethnicities, the potential for abuse of human rights and/or SRH appears to be small, whereas for others the potential is greater, although still low. Further the study found that efforts to safeguard young people should also target the initiation counselors in those ethnicities with ceremonies where abuse was more likely. In some cases, legal changes may also help safeguard the youth who participate in initiation.

The study also suggests that changes in policy and increased buy-in among key community-level stakeholders, such as village headmen and initiation counselors, may be particularly beneficial understanding of the impact of CSE knowledge at the initiation camps is a valuable component when training young people about becoming an adult.

CSE does not only delay age of sex debut but also increases access to Sexual Reproductive Health services and encourages adolescents to practice protective sexual behaviour such as decreased frequency of sex, fewer partners, and increased use of condoms and other forms of contraception.



## MODIFYING HARMFUL CULTURAL PRACTICES AND TRADITIONS

The Safeguard Young People programme, a regional programme implemented in eight southern Africa countries of Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, Swaziland, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe has assisted in the modification of harmful cultural practices that were driving early marriages and child pregnancies in the country.

Implemented in the country by the Malawi Girl Guides Association (MAGGA), in the six districts of Chiradzulu, Chikwawa, Dedza, Mangochi, Mchinji and Nkhata Bay, the SYP programme has resulted into the incorporation of Comprehensive Sexuality Education in the initiation counselling curriculum.

Rose Khonje Programme Analyst Adolescents and Youth at the UNFPA says the Safeguard

Young People programme which aims at making sure that young people especially adolescent girls are protected from STIs, HIV/AIDS, harmful cultural practices, gender based and early pregnancies has resulted into the eradication of harmful practices that were negatively impinging on the girls' right to education.

*“We want to make sure that girls reach their full potential by teaching the girls issues to do with Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) which is a curriculum based educa-*

*ople equipping them with knowledge skills and values so that they can develop positive attitudes about sexuality,” said Khonje.*

Khonje said that delivered in or out of school, CSE is a package of age appropriate messages that is passed on to adolescents and young people so that they have appropriate information on their sexual and reproductive health life. She said CSE is scientifically proven and is gender and culturally sensitive.

*“Appropriate SRHR messages help adolescents and young people to have appropriate information on their sexual and reproductive health life.”*

She said that realizing there are several factors that make adolescent girls to get early pregnancies, and go into early marriages, the SYP programme has been closely working with initiation counsellor and traditional leaders who are the custodians of passage rites.

“In our tradition for a person to move from childhood to adulthood they pass through initiation. In 2015 we conducted a comprehensive research on cultural practices that impinge on the sexuality

of adolescent girls and we found that initiation ceremonies were a place where girls were encouraged to indulge in early sexual relationships,” said Khonje. She said with the coming of comprehensive sexuality education and good working relationship between the Malawi Girl Guides Association and the initiation counsellors were able to realise and accept that some of the practices that were being promoted at the initiation camps were not good and were fuelling the early marriages.

“One of the districts that was emphasised on was Mangochi where there are so many school drop-outs and early marriages coming from initiation where they are taught for example how to practice sex,” said Khonje.

Khonje said that because of the SYP, initiation counsellors have incorporated CSE modules in the initiation curriculum and have since started conducting initiation ceremonies during school holidays.

*“Now when you go to initiation camps you will find that they are leaving out some of the information that was previously passed to the children and they have since incorporated comprehensive sexuality information in their curriculum,” said Khonje.*



## WE ARE FOR GIRLS

**T**he Malawi Girl Guides Association of Malawibelieves girls are a very important resource to national development. Mphatso Baluwa Jimu, National Coordinator of the Malawi Girl Guides Association says the Safeguard Young People programme is unique in that it incorporates the social and development interests and needs of the young people.

She said that the SYP looks at vast areas of the adolescent girls and boys lives. She said the programme incorporates creative approaches including the inclusion of music so that the youth are attracted to the activities through the involvement of their celebrities.

“The ownership of SYP is within the youth themselves and in the community where they are able to own the results and they are to speak on what they want and the changes that they want to see, in short it’s one of the programmes that listens to the youth and tries to support them,” said Baluwa Jimu.

She said the programme has since promoted the uptake of contraceptive methods among the youth and has created a support mechanism for sexuality education as initiation councilors have become involved in the transfer of comprehensive sexuality education to the youth.





## KATULI CHANGES SRH APPROACH

**T**he Safeguarding Young People programme has created a positive attitude towards education among girls in Mangochi. The area of Senior Chief Katuli in Mangochi was once one of the areas where girls were previously not interested to continue with their education because of the sexuality information they were getting at initiation camps.

According to Senior chief Katuli, as opposed to the past, the Programme (SYP) has changed

the pattern in girls' access to sexuality information. He said the SYP has encouraged girls to continue with their education, contrary to the past where girls were encouraged to marry as soon as they had started experiencing menstruation.

“Previously these girls never knew their value in society, and how they could take care of their bodies, but the coming of MAGGA under the SYP programme has created an environ-

ent where girls are now interested in education,” says Katuli.

“Currently girls are spending much of their time at the Safe Spaces where they are discussing more about their future lives they are encouraging each other that a progressive girls’ life involves attaining education as well as accessing SRH services”, said Katuli.

Katuli said that girls are now interested to continue with their education and marry at a proper time when they are physically mature and have attained education. Following the MAGGA interventions, Katuli said there has been a change on how initiation practices are done as well as a revision of the syllabi at the initiation camps. Now young people are able to patronize health facilities to access condoms and other contraceptives.

“Currently the youth are getting age appropriate information during initiation ceremonies, previously initiation camps used to be places where the youth were taught different immoral behaviour through obscene songs and other information that was passed on during initiation camps,” said Katuli.

He said the long-term partnership between the traditional leaders and non-governmental organisations such as the Malawi Girl Guides has assisted in the creation of an age appropriate initiation syllabus where the youth are equipped with relevant and appropriate sexuality information.

“People that say the revision of some of the information that we pass on to the youth at the initiation camps is a departure from our culture do not understand how the world is changing, culture is there to hold our society,” he said.

He said the revision of the initiation syllabus was based on informed understanding of verifiable hazards of such information on the youth and it could not be rational to continue with customs that are not sensible in the modern society.

“Even in the times of our ancestors, age appropriate sexuality information was passed to the initiates as at the time youth that were above the age of eighteen and mature went to camp,” said Katuli.



## NGALIBA'S A TOOL OF CHANGE

**A**meki Dalabu is a traditional initiator or (Ngaliba) in vernacular who plies his trade at Katuli in Mangochi. Dalabu who has been a Ngaliba for many decades has performed the rites of passage which includes circumcision of the males in the area.

At the initiation camp, the boys are taught social values so that they can responsibly behave when they return to society after the initiation procedure. The passage of time has however seen a shift from the messages that were previously relayed to the initiates.

“Previously we used to pass inappropriate sexual knowledge young boys, then we only looked at signs of maturity in order to initiate boys,” said Dalabu.

He said the previous curriculum included teaching the initiates how they can practice sex; however, this information has since been removed from the syllabi at the initiation ceremonies.

“We are now passing information on how the boys can morally behave in society and we also advise them to avoid sexual immorality as our present days are quite very different from the past,” he said.

He said the knowledge that the traditional initiators have gained from the SYP has turned initiation camps from places where the initiates were encouraged to experiment on sex to places where the youth are equipped with skills on how they can responsibly behave in society.



## TRANSFORMED INITIATION FOR GIRLS

**S**habil Layini is a female initiation counsellor, as female initiator; Layini says that she makes sure that the girls are brought to camp during the school holiday so that they are given a chance to pursue education.

“When the girls are brought to camp I tell them that their parents have sent them for initiation so that they should responsibly behave in society,” said Layini.

She said as an initiation counsellor she is well aware that education is any girl’s right and she makes sure that the initiation camps are conducted within a short period so that the girls can quickly go home to continue with their education.

“I mostly counsel young girls and the information I pass on to them is appropriate to their age, and they are mostly about responsible social behaviour,” she said.



## ROLE OF MOTHER GROUPS IN CSE

Jennifer M'madi is the mother group chair at Mdinde Primary School at Traditional Authority Katuli in Mangochi. As chair of the mother group, M'madi takes a lead role in advising girls at the school.

Members of the mother group advise girls to avoid premarital sex that could result into unplanned pregnancies. M'madi said that the advice is tailored in such a way that it can encourage the girls to continue with their education.

“We advise the girls to always be properly dressed and avoid getting unplanned pregnancies that are a threat to the girls’ livelihoods,” said M'madi.

Girls that are sexually active, M'madi said that they are advised to use contraceptive to avoid getting pregnant and continue with their education. She said the mother group encourages the girls to use medical contraception methods.

“We encourage the girls to use contraceptives and we have seen a reduction of unplanned pregnancies in the area,” said M'madi.

She said the members of the mother group also advise girls that have become pregnant to continue attending classes until their pregnancy is due. She said the advice has seen many girls that became pregnant continue with their education.

She said since the beginning of the intervention that is being promoted by the Malawi Girl Guides Association under the Safeguard Young People programme, there has been increased access in sexual and reproductive health services.

“As members of the mother group we have observed that our interventions have been worthwhile, we have seen that dropped out of school because they were pregnant returning to school,” said M'madi.



## EFFECTIVE COORDINATION FOR HEALTH OUTCOMES

**S**takeholder coordination has helped to promote Comprehensive Sexuality Education in Chikwawa district. Bordering Mozambique where child marriages are rampant, Chikwawa district is one of the districts that used to register high rates of child marriages, but things are now changing.

Frighone Bishopu a CSE facilitator at Sub-Traditional Authority Masache in Chikwawa has witnessed the improvement of sex health rights seeking behaviour among young people in his area.

As a CSE facilitator, Bishop has been involved in the coordination of the Safeguarding Young People (SYP), a programme that the Malawi Girl Guides is implementing in the district with support from the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA).

“As a CSE facilitator I interact with young people of the ages ranging from 10 to 24 on different issues concerning their livelihoods more especially on growth and development, sexual reproductive health, rights and values, gender and cultural values,” said Bishop.

To have meaningful impact on the intervention, Bishop said that he has been working in partnership with different stakeholders including health authorities, district social welfare office, the youth office and education authorities.

He said since the coming of the SYP programme in the district there has been a positive change in some of the cultural practices that were deemed harmful to the youth. He said the initiative has resulted into initiators giving age appropriate information to young people.

“For instance at initiation camps there is a change in the way information is passed to young people where age appropriate information is passed to the initiates, we discovered that we were wrongly doing the initiation ceremonies as we were giving the initiates information that is not appropriate to their age,” he said.

Gerald Pengapenga, Primary Education Adviser for Konzere Zone in Chikwawa said that MAGGA through the SYP programme has assisted in the modification of harmful cultural practices where initiation counsellors have integrated CSE into their curriculum.

According to Pengapenga while MAGGA is geared at ensuring that more girls remain in school, it has through the SYP stood by its promise by supporting girls in the district with learning materials.

He said MAGGA through another programme supported by UN, Action for adolescent girls provided bicycles to the learners that live far from their schools. The bicycles he said have eased mobility problems to and from school for the learners and they have since helped to retain girls in class.

“The girls that received the bicycles are having

many benefits, for example learners that come from far were coming to school very late and very tired, however, after receiving these bicycles they are able to come to school early and are able to attend all classes in time,” he said.

He said following the bicycle donation, the pass rate for girls has improved as the learners are attending all classes. He said the bicycles have reduces absenteeism among the female learners adding that girls that had received the bicycles are also doing well in class.

He said through the SYP programme, MAGGA has equipped the female learners with re-usable sanitary pad making skills and has also created Safe Spaces where female learners are able to change in a situation they start their menstruation period while in school. He said the availability of sanitary pads in school has also reduced the rate of absenteeism among girls.

Maurine Thomu, a member of the school management committee at Konzere Teacher Development Centre said that the SYP programme has assisted in the promotion of girls’ right to education in the district. She said that the bicycles that the MAGGA has been providing to needy students have assisted in the reduction of school dropout rates among girls in the area.

*“These bicycles have eased the girls’ mobility problems to school and they have also assisted to reduce violence that these girls were sometimes facing when they are coming late from school,” she said*

# LIVING RESULTS



**M**ercy Frazer is a shining example of girls that became pregnant while in primary school but have managed to continue with their education and finished secondary education.

Mercy became pregnant while she was in standard seven, and as is mostly the case, the boy that impregnated her denied the pregnancy.

“I had to face the shame and bear the responsibility of a teenage pregnancy by myself. The mother group had been a good motivation throughout the time I was pregnant as well as after giving birth, they actually encouraged me to return to school after I had nursed by child

for one year,” said Mercy.

Now a guide leader at Konzere in Chikwawa, Mercy returned to school after she heard from the mother group members that the Malawi Girl Guides is supporting girls that became pregnant and are willing to go back to school with bursaries.

A role model for girls in the area who meet her similar fate, Mercy said that when she returned to school she worked hard in class and was determined to continue with education and achieve in life.

“When I gave birth I suffered many problems I could not afford to provide adequate care for my child, I could not afford soap for my child’s laundry and I also became a subject of public ridicule,” she said.

When she returned to school, Mercy said, her previous experience as a teenage mother and the support and encouragement that she has been getting from the MAGGA since she was in standard seven made her to start looking at life with a different perspective.

As a guide leader, Mercy now encourages girls not to become pregnant whilst in school and those that have become pregnant not to lose hope as the currently the country has a re-admission policy for girls that became pregnant.

“I have seen the importance of school I am now a teacher at a private primary school, and it has become my responsibility to encourage my fellow girls not to go into under-age marriages as well as never to become pregnant whilst in school, for those that are sexually active I encourage them to use contraceptives,” she said.

She said as a guide leader she motivates girls to have positive social values and be focused in their lives so that they can achieve their goals in life.





## ADVOCATES OF CHANGE

The Safeguarding Young People programme has turned initiation counsellors in Chikwawa as agents of change. The counsellors have now started giving age appropriate information to learners in the district.

Alinafe Chisowa, an initiation counsellors at Konzere in the district said after they were reached by the Malawi Girl Guides with CSE information, the counsellors have adopted a new approach to imparting sexuality information to girls.

“We are teaching girls proper manners, we tell girls that are in school to be properly

dressed and to avoid getting involved in sexual activities before they are through with their education and are ready for marriage,” said Chisowa.

Chisowa said that girls that have started menstruation are taught menstrual hygiene and good society values such as decent dressing, while those that are ready to go into marriage are taught marriage rites such as how to take care of their sex life in marriage. Chisowa who dropped out of school in junior secondary school because her parents could not afford her tuition fees said that she has also been using the initiation camps to encourage girls to remain in school.

*“If I had a chance to go ahead with my education I surely know I could be self-reliant, and when we are advising the girls during initiation we encourage them to work hard in school so that they have to be independent later in life,” she said.*

Eliza Simbi is another initiation councillor at Konzere in Chikwawa. According to Simbi there has been a modification on how the initiation ceremonies are con-

ducted to give room for school going girls to attend school before they go into the traditional Maseseto initiation camp.

Simbi who doubles as member of mother group at Konzere Primary School and a traditional initiator in Nkhachula village said that as traditional initiators, they have now started conducting the traditional girls’ initiation camps during school holidays to allow girls to attend school.

She said that since the coming of the SYP programme there has been a change in how sexuality education is passed on to the youth. The girl child’s right to education can however not be protected if boys do not access accurate sexuality information.

Martin Nyaluso a 49-year-old male initiation counsellor from Konzere who has been engaged as a counsellor for the past five years said while under Sena cultural traditions girls are the ones that are mostly targeted with sexuality information, young men, especially those that are preparing for marriage are currently also being targeted with comprehensive sexuality information.

He said while the Sena people do not have specific initiation rites for boys, the young men are initiated on how to take care of their families and how they can respect the rights of their wives. He said the young men are also told how they have to plan for their families.



## MENSTRUAL HYGIENE IN SCHOOL

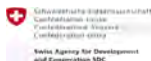
**A**t Ntayanjanja School in Chikwawa, the Safeguarding Young People programme implemented by the Malawi Girl Guides Association has brought positive change in girl's attitude towards menstrual health. In an area where teenage girls usually stayed out of school during their menstruation cycles.

According to Petro Bande chairperson of the school management committee at Ntayanjanja School, through the SYP programme girls have access to menstrual hygiene services within the

school premises.

“The provision of sanitary pads within the school premises has ensured that girls return to school even when they are experiencing periods. They have a chance to change sanitary pads in school changing rooms” said Bande

“We ensure that the menstrual pads are at spaces where girls can easily access without feeling ashamed, only girls that have started experiencing menstruation can access these spaces and these pads are carefully taken care of,” he said.





Evelyn Makilecha a fourteen-year-old standard seven learner at Mwananjovu Primary School at Konzere zone in Chikwawa said that before the coming of the Malawi Girl Guides Association with the Safeguard Young People Programme, she used to miss classes when she was going through her menstruation periods. “Before the Malawi Girl Guides came to the area many girls used to miss classes when they were going through the menstruation periods

because they did not have sanitary pads,” she said.

However, this is no longer the case. Evelyn said that through the Safe Space mentorship she has learnt how sew reusable menstrual pads that she said have played an important part of her menstrual hygiene.

When she has started experiencing her menstrual periods while in a school, she said, there is a changing room where girls go to clean themselves and return to class.

“Some girls can’t afford to buy the pads and they are provided pads when they start experiencing their periods while in school and they are also provided with some to use at home,” she said.

Through the mentorship she has been getting from the MAGGA Safe Spaces, Evelyn has been able to encourage her peers that dropped out of school to return to class.

Similarly, Naomi Jalikisi is a fifteen-year-standard eight learner at Konzere Primary School. Naomi said the reusable sanitary pads have helped girls to remain class. Previously, Naomi said, girls could at times miss out of class because they would clean themselves during their menstruation periods while in school.

“Previously we could miss classes when we were experiencing our monthly periods because schools did not have changing rooms where we could clean up when we experience menstruation in school, we used to change anywhere and boys used to laugh at us,” she said.

The SYP programme has however introduced changing rooms in schools where girls are able to clean-up and change when they are experiencing monthly periods. She said the availability of the sanitary pads in school is promoting the girl right to education.

# RIDING BACK TO CLASS



Rebecca Thom is a standard eight learner at Konzere primary school in Chikwawa. Rebecca is one of the girls that have benefited from the the UN Action for girls bicycle programme being implemented in Mangochi and Chikwawa districts.

Before she had the bicycle, Rebecca used to regularly miss classes because of the long distance she used to travel to and from school. At the time, she used to travel for close to two hours to school.

The bicycle has however now changed the situation; Rebecca does not miss classes because she can easily travel to school. The time she takes to travel to school has drastically been reduced to less than thirty minutes and Rebecca does not miss classes.

“The Malawi Girl Guides gave me a bicycle because I come from far, I used to come to school very late, but since they gave me the

bicycle I come to school on time and I participate in all classes my school performance has since improved,” said Rebecca.

She said because of the long distances girls that travel to school, some of her peers have been victims of sexual violence. She has vivid examples of two friends that were raped by a group of girls after they had an argument with the boys on the way to school.

“Some of my friends have become pregnant have become pregnant because they used to have chance to engage in sexual relationships because of the opportunity to meet which the long distance to school provided,” she said.

Rebecca now takes time to encourage her peers to work hard in school, for those that dropped out of school for different reasons she encourages them to return to class. Rebecca said the bicycle has also been a source of encouragement to her peers who have started working hard in school believing that they will at one point have an opportunity of being granted a bicycle.

“I have a friend who dropped out of school because of a pregnancy, she now has a child, and I always encourage her to return to school when she has nursed her child for a year,” said Rebecca.

Rebecca however does not feel that the bicycle is the only benefit she has gained from her participation at the Malawi Girl Guides Association activities under the SYP programme. She has also gained sanitary pad making skills that she says have eased her menstrual hygiene challenges.

“The sanitary reusable sanitary pads have made it possible that we can easily continue with our education, at school we have been given a special room where we can clean up when we start experiencing the periods in school,” said Rebecca.



## GIVING GIRLS DIGNITY

Joyce Kayira is a thirteen-year-old girl from Mpamba in Nkhatabay who has just started her form one at Mpamba Community Day Secondary School. Since she was in standard eight, Joyce has been attending activities by MAGGA where she said she has been taught different skills including on how to sew reusable sanitary pads.

At the activities she patronizes girls are advised how to properly behave in society, respect their parents and to be God fearing. Through the initiatives, she said girls are also advised what to do when they have started experiencing their first menstruation periods.

“We have been advised that when we have started experiencing our menstruation for the first time we should tell our mother or members of the mother group at school, if one is very shy, we are advised to tell a friend who can later tell our mother,” said Joyce.

She said the reusable sanitary pads that she has learnt sewing from the Safe Spaces mentorship are good as they are very cheap and handy as compared to the disposable pads that are sold in shops. She said the sanitary pads have been one of the component that has added to her success in school.

“I have never missed my lessons since I started using the cloth sewn reusable sanitary pads, these pads are very good because I am able to make them myself at home,” said Joyce. She said the reusable home sewn sanitary pads were good in that they are always accessible for any girl because they are not as expensive as the disposable sanitary pads sold in shops.

Joyce said the home sewn reusable sanitary pads have assisted her to make it to secondary school because she could not miss classes because she was going through her monthly periods.



## NO MORE BARRIERS

**M**elina Phiri is a member of the mother group at Mpamba Primary School in Traditional Authority Timbili in Nkhatabay. As a member of the mother group, Phiri has been working with the Malawi Girl Guides Association under the Safeguard Young People Programme, helping pass important life skills to girls.

Previously, Phiri said girls used to go on a seven-day quarantine after experiencing their first menstruation where they were taught how to practice menstrual hygiene, but this she said is no longer the case. Girls, she said, are prepared for their first menstruation during activities in the SYP programme where girls are taught how to sew reusable cloth sanitary pads.

“We prepare the girls of what they are sup-

we teach them how they can use sanitary pads and how to practice menstrual hygiene,” said Phiri.

She said the approach has protected girls from early sex initiation as the previous practice where girls that have started experiencing menstruation were announced to the village exposed the girls to sexual temptations. She said upon announcing that a girl had started experiencing her periods, she became subject of girls sexual attraction, where boys were competing to break her virginity.

“Because of the sexuality information that we are imparting on the girls at the girl guides, the girl’s education is not disrupted because she has started experiencing her periods as she normally continues with her education in the period she is experiencing her menstruation,” said Phiri.

Phiri said that at every school has a teacher that is responsible for the management of the reusable sanitary pads. The girls she said report to this teacher when they start experiencing their periods in school. As a member of the mother group Phiri said she also follows up on girls that have been sent into marriage because they have become pregnant.

“When a girl has become pregnant and she has been sent to the family of the boy that impregnated her, we follow up with the children and where necessary annul such unions, I have a good example of a girl that we removed from such a family that has made it to secondary school,” said Phiri.

Phiri said the mother group has also been encouraging girls that have suffered sexual abuse to authorities. She said members of the mother group have also been encouraging girls that are sexually active to start using contraceptives to protect their right to education.



## POLICY THAT EMPOWER GIRLS

In the Nkhata Bay district, the menstruation policy that is encouraging the use of reusable sanitary pads among school going girls has assisted girls aged between 10-18 to continue with their education through school. While menstruation has been identified as a challenge that has been denying girls their right education with statistics indicating that on average a Malawian girl annually misses 85 school days due to menstruation.

However, communities in Nkhatabay have adopted a menstruation policy that encourages the use of reusable sanitary pads which is set back that leads many school going girls to withdraw from school. Village Headman Zyolonkhope of Traditional Authority Timbili in the district said the policy that is being promoted by the Malawi Girl Guides Association has promoted girls' right to access of education.

Zyolonkhope said while the initiative seeks to promote girls right to education by removing harmful cultural practices that were negatively

impinging on the girl's right to education, the traditional leaders are not leaving the responsibility of modification of cultural practices to women only.

“The SYP programme is smoothly going into the district, as traditional leaders we are not leaving the responsibility of protecting the girls to women alone we are taking a leading role in modification of practices that were negatively impinging on the girl's right to education,” said Zyolonkhope.

Zyolonkhope said that among some of the practices, the traditional leaders are discouraging the custom of confining girls into a seven-day isolation after attaining puberty. He said the practice was denying girls a right to education.

“Currently, when a girl has started experiencing her periods she still goes to school where she is advised by the CSE teachers and members of the mother group on how to practice menstrual hygiene,” he said.



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