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Enabling Girls to Advance Gender Equity (ENGAGE) Report on the Midline Evaluation Results

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Laura Hinson, Ted Rizzo, Emily Schaub

Contents

Executive Summary

This report presents the findings from the midline evaluation of the Enabling Girls to Advance Gender Equity (ENGAGE) program, which is currently being implemented in Thyolo and Phalombe Districts, Southern Malawi. The program focuses on empowering adolescent girls to champion their own rights and work with community leaders to advocate for aspects of girls' lives related to child marriage, education and sexual and reproductive health. In addition, trained civil society organizations (CSOs) were funded to implement programs for girls around the same issues. The program is funded for the period 2016-2020 by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

The midline evaluation of ENGAGE is a qualitative study that focuses on understanding perspectives about girls' lives in these communities as well as the challenges and opportunities of the ENGAGE program. Data collection and analysis took place from November 2018 through July 2019 and was led by the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW). Participants in the midline evaluation included girl leaders who participate in ENGAGE, CSO leaders who are working with ENGAGE, community leaders and stakeholders with expertise in their communities on issues that impact adolescent girls. In addition, ICRW conducted focus group discussions with groups of decision-makers related to child marriage, including girls themselves, mothers, fathers, and uncles. In total, ICRW conducted data collection events with 119 individuals across four Traditional Authorities in the districts of Thyolo and Phalombe.

Data collection and analysis was divided into two main areas of inquiry. First, understanding what girls' lives are like in these communities around issues related to child marriage, education, sexual and reproductive health and harmful and traditional practices. Secondly, we sought to understand the role of ENGAGE—including opportunities presented by and challenges with this program.

Findings related to girls' lives in Phalombe and Thyolo District include the following:

- *Theme 1: "Adolescent girls in the community we work in face a lot of challenges in life.[1]": Challenges in Girls' Daily Experience* – This theme describes participants' perspectives on girls' daily lives in the districts, including their experience with challenges such as poverty and violence.
- *Theme 2: "There is change … but to say the truth, child marriage is still a major problem in this area[2]": Child Marriage in Phalombe and Thyolo Districts* – This theme explores the drivers of child marriage, including poverty, pregnancy and peer pressure, along with a discussion of perceptions related to the primary decision-makers of girls when it comes to marriage.

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[1] Male CSO Leader
[2] Female CSO Leader

- *Theme 3: "We have introduced by-laws to fight child marriage because we now understand that child marriage is a crime[3]": By-laws and sanctions related to child marriage behavior* – In this theme, we highlight how by-laws and other community systems related to marriage have arisen and aim to protect girls.
- *Theme 4: "You are labeled as a prostitute[4]": Girls' sexual and reproductive health and access to family planning* – This theme discusses perceptions around girls' access to and use of contraceptive and other sexual and reproductive health services in the community, along with the community's perception of girls who use these products and services.
- *Theme 5: "Getting enrolled in school and being educated is the only opportunity[5]": Girls' education is identified as important, but girls face significant barriers to education* – This theme showcases information related to how participants understood girls' access to and participation in school.
- *Theme 6: "We have been discouraged to continue the traditional camps because we have witnessed the effects it has on girls[6]": Effects of harmful traditional practices and the community response* – In this theme, we explore perceptions of the impact of initiation camps and other harmful and traditional practices on girls.

Findings related to the ENGAGE program include the following:

- *Theme 1: Girls' Empowerment and CSO Capacity Building* – In this theme we discuss the perception of the impact the program has had on participants, including girl leaders and CSO leaders, in terms of their own empowerment.
- *Theme 2: Opportunities and successes of ENGAGE's work* – In this theme we highlight participants' positive perceptions of the impact of ENGAGE's work in the community, including the perception that child marriage has reduced dramatically.
- *Theme 3: Challenges to and of ENGAGE's work* – In this theme we discuss some of the main challenges of the ENGAGE program, according to participants, including girl leaders' exposure to harassment and violence and limited resources.

In the last section of the report, we contextualize these findings and discuss recommendations that all organizations working to empower girls and/or improve the well being of girls in communities in Southern Malawi should consider.

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[3] Male Community Leader, Changata

[4] Girl Leader, Changata, 15, Standard 8

[5] Girl Leader, Changata, 17, Form 3

[6] Male Traditional Leader, Changata

Background

Child marriage is a widespread violation of human rights, an impediment to girls' health and wellbeing, access to education and a barrier to social and economic development (1–6). Girls who marry young are at greater risk of gender-based violence and face higher rates of HIV/STIs than their older peers (3,6–8). They often have limited decision-making power at home, including to negotiate the use of family planning and other critical decisions within and outside of their marital relationships (2,3,6,9,10).

Malawi has the 12th highest rate of child marriage in the world, with nearly half of all girls marrying before age 18 (11). Girls in Southern Malawi also experience harmful traditional practices—especially during the initiation camps[7] commonly held during puberty—including *kusasa fumbi,* or forced sexual initiation (12,13). Such practices increase the risk of HIV infection and unwanted pregnancy, which may result in child marriage and maternal death (12).

In 2011, Rise Up's Let Girls Lead initiative partnered with GENET to launch the "Stop Child Marriage" pilot program in the Chiradzulo District in Southern Malawi. As part of the pilot, GENET and Rise Up trained more than 200 girls in leadership, advocacy, storytelling, laws and policies, communications, community-organizing and gender equity. GENET and Rise Up also enabled civil society leaders and organizations to reduce the cultural acceptance and prevalence of child marriage and harmful traditional practices by creating and implementing local by-laws prohibiting these practices within the traditional authority (TA) system. The pilot aimed to ensure that girls stayed in school, had greater access to family planning information and services and delayed marriage and child bearing. Since the launch of the "Stop Child Marriage" pilot in Chiradzulo District, girls have successfully advocated with 60 village chiefs to ratify and enact by-laws that protect thousands of adolescent girls from early marriage and up to an 80 percent reduction in child marriage has been reported, with several communities declared "child marriage free" based on the number of child marriages declined or rejected by village chiefs (14).

In recent years, Malawi's government has made dramatic strides in setting laws to end child marriage at a national level. In 2015, parliament passed a law that banned marriage before the age of 18 without parental consent and in April 2017, President Peter Mutharika signed into law a constitutional amendment removing the parental consent loophole (15). However, it was

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[7] These camps are a contested coming of age rite for girls in Malawi. Girls go to the camps to learn about how to be women. Traditionally, one element of these camps was forced sexual contact with an older man, called a "hyena." While this practice continues, there are now alternate versions of the camps which do not include this practice.

uncertain whether local administrators were enforcing these and other laws at the district and TA levels.

To respond to this, the Enabling Girls to Advance Gender Equity (ENGAGE) project, funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, was launched in 2016 by Rise Up of the Public Health Institute (PHI), the Girls Empowerment Network of Malawi (GENET), Youth Tech Health (YTH), the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) and YONECO. The purpose of the project is to expand the techniques used in the "Stop Child Marriage" pilot to empower girls and build an enabling environment. ICRW is engaged to evaluate the effects these techniques have on attitudes and norms towards child marriage among decision-makers for adolescent girls.

This report presents the findings from the qualitative midline evaluation.

ENGAGE Intervention Activities

ENGAGE, implemented in two districts in Southern Malawi, seeks to empower girls and civil society organization (CSO) leaders to influence traditional and religious leaders, male authority figures and other duty-bearers to shift norms around child marriage and increase gender equality, eventually reducing child marriage and related harmful traditional practices and improving outcomes in education and sexual and reproductive health (SRH). ENGAGE employs a multi-pronged approach to empower adolescent girls to increase their autonomy and decision-making agency, advance more gender-equitable social norms and build CSO capacity to hold duty-bearers accountable for ending child marriage, keeping girls in school and improving access to reproductive health services.

ENGAGE includes the following interventions:

- **Training and peer-based clubs for adolescent girls:** GENET works with girls ages 15-17 to empower them to collectively take on a greater role in decisions pertaining to their education, health and autonomy. These girls engage other girls ages 10-18 through clubs to discuss child marriage and related issues in their own communities and mobilize them to speak out for their rights with chiefs, parents and other duty-bearers.
- **Training and engaging local CSOs:** Rise Up has trained and continues to provide technical and financial support to a cadre of CSO leaders. This group engages with stakeholders, facilitates mechanisms that help community leaders to be accountable and conducts other activities to support an enabling environment to end child marriage through concerted interventions with and without trained ENGAGE girls.
- **SMS/Radio campaign:** YTH and YONECO implement an SMS and radio campaign strategy to build community support to end child marriage and enhance gender equity by engaging key target groups including men and boys, traditional and religious authorities, government officials and girls themselves.

The overall goal of the project is to reduce child marriage by addressing gender inequitable attitudes among community members and leaders and helping community members see and accept the benefits of educating girls. As part of this process community members need to understand the laws related to child marriage as well as the reason for these laws and the effect early marriage has on girls, their families and their communities.

The ENGAGE intervention is currently being implemented with two cohorts each of adolescent girls (approximately 400 girls in each cohort) and CSO leaders (18 leaders trained per cohort, representing 27 organizations, with 14 CSOs awarded funds for eight advocacy strategies).

Evaluation of ENGAGE

ICRW is currently conducting an impact evaluation of the first two of the intervention activities described above using a quasi-experimental pre-test/post-test study design. The third activity (SMS/radio campaign) is implemented across both districts and is excluded from the evaluation design.

The project began with an inception phase in November and December of 2016, with baseline evaluation conducted in June – July of 2017. Due to unforeseen circumstances, implementation of the intervention activities began several months following baseline.
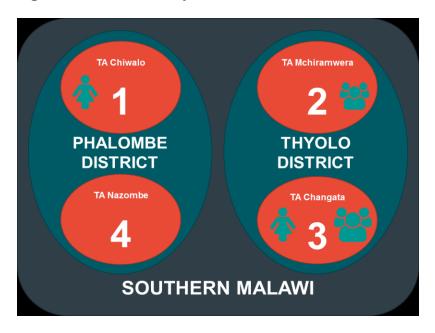
Overall study design

The evaluation of ENGAGE aims to assess the effectiveness of empowering girls and building the capacity of CSOs on outcomes related to child marriage. The primary objective—as measured through a quantitative survey before and after implementation—is to assess changes in knowledge, attitudes and to the extent possible, norms, around child marriage among adult decision-makers.

At baseline, four TAs, which are the next administrative units down from the district, were randomly assigned to one of four evaluation arms (**Figure 1**):

- Empowering girls only (Arm 1 – TA Chiwalo, Phalombe District)
- Building the capacity of CSOs only (Arm 2 – TA Mchiramwera, Thyolo District)
- The combination of empowering girls and building CSO capacity (Arm 3 – TA Changata, Thyolo District)
- Comparison communities (Arm 4 – TA Nazombe, Phalombe District)

Figure 1. ENGAGE Study Arms

The four-arm design allows for the comparison of the effectiveness of the different interventions against a comparison area where no intervention takes place, as well as between the different interventions. The primary hypothesis is that both interventions will positively change community norms and attitudes around child marriage and related outcomes like education and SRH among adult decision-makers and that the combination of the girls' empowerment intervention and the CSO intervention will have a greater effect on these outcomes than will either intervention on its own.

ICRW is conducting a quantitative household survey among adult decision makers of adolescent girls at baseline (mid-2017) and endline (early 2020). Qualitative data collection occurred at midline (late 2018) and will occur again at endline (early 2020) with ENGAGE participants and community stakeholders.

Information about the quantitative baseline and endline survey methodology and sampling procedures conducted at baseline, along with highlights from the baseline findings, is found in **Appendix A.**

Midline evaluation objectives and methods

Qualitative data at midline and endline will allow the evaluation team to more thoroughly assess shifts in norms around child marriage, including norms around girls' SRH, as part of the larger

impact evaluation. The qualitative data collection will also capture in greater detail how the intervention occurred at the community level (process evaluation).

Midline data collection occurred from November to December 2018.

The key objectives of the qualitative midline evaluation were:

1. To provide a more in-depth and nuanced understanding of the issues surrounding child marriage in these communities; and
2. To collect information about how the intervention activities were being implemented (in terms of what was working, what was not working).

In-depth interviews (IDIs) with girls and CSO leaders aimed to elucidate individuals' personal experience with and perceptions of ENGAGE in their community, along with their insights into the lives of adolescent girls in their community, especially related to child marriage. Key informant interviews (KIIs) with community stakeholders aimed to get expert insights on issues related to adolescent girls and outsider perspectives on the ENGAGE program. The purpose of the focus group discussions (FGDs) was to understand more nuance around social norms related to child marriage, specifically related to empirical and normative expectations, reference groups, sanctions and exceptions. The FGDs used a vignette approach and were conducted among various reference groups of girls at risk of child marriage (16).

Participant types

IDIs, KIIs, and FGDs were conducted with individuals participating in the ENGAGE program and other key stakeholders, as is shown in **Table 1** below.

Table 1: Midline evaluation participant sample information

Data collection participant and type	Number and location
In-depth interviews with girls participating in ENGAGE (ages 15 to 17)	N=20 (Ten in TA Changata, Ten in Chiwalo)
In-depth interviews with CSO leaders participating in ENGAGE	N=10 (All in Thyolo District, many working in both TA Changata and TA Mchiramwera)
Key informant interviews with stakeholders	N=16 (Four in each TA)
Focus Group Discussions with girls ages 15-18 and reference groups for girls at risk of or engaged in child marriage	N=8 (Four in each of two communities in TA Changata)

Training of data collectors, data collection and data cleaning

A two-person ICRW team trained the team of data collectors in November 2018. The research team in Malawi consisted of five GENET staff members working on projects other than ENGAGE. To facilitate recruitment efforts, given that most midline participants were participating in ENGAGE, ICRW contracted GENET staff members to conduct the research. However, GENET staff involved in the midline were not allowed to be involved in ENGAGE implementation in any way. The week-long training focused on the overview of the study, human subjects' research ethics, interview techniques and a review of the research protocol and all related materials including: (a) interview guides; (b) screening tools; and (c) informed consent forms. Following training, the team travelled immediately to the field to begin data collection. Data collection took place over two weeks in November 2018. One ICRW team member remained in the field for the first week of data collection and conducted nightly debriefs with the data collectors.

Selection of individual study participants

The midline evaluation was conducted shortly after the beginning of work with the second cohorts, so priority in sampling was given to Cohort 1, with 80 percent of study participant girl leaders and CSO leaders selected from Cohort 1 and 20 percent from Cohort 2.

Recruitment of girl leaders: To recruit girl leaders, in each district, four sites[8] with Cohort 1 girls and one site with Cohort 2 girls were selected. The ENGAGE implementation team called meetings among girl leaders in each of the selected sites during which a member of the research team explained the study and asked if any girl leaders were interested in volunteering to participate. Among girls who were interested, the team randomly selected two girls in each site to participate. Before enrollment, the team visited the selected girls' parents to obtain informed consent and scheduled interviews with the girls for the next day. The girls' assent was obtained prior to beginning the interview.

Recruiting CSO leaders: To recruit CSO leaders, the research team first obtained a list of funded CSO leaders from each cohort. As eight CSO leaders were funded out of Cohort 1, no further randomization was necessary and interviews were conducted with all eight leaders. Two leaders were randomly selected from the list of Cohort 2 CSO leaders. The research team contacted CSO leaders to schedule times for the interviews and obtained informed consent prior to beginning the interviews.

Recruiting key informants: To recruit key informants, the GENET and Rise Up implementation teams suggested individuals who were familiar with ENGAGE's work in three of the four study sites. Four individuals each in TAs Changata, Chiwalo and Mchiramwera were selected. In the comparison site, GENET and Rise Up selected four community leaders who were knowledgeable about issues related to adolescents in their community. The research team contacted these participants to schedule times for the interviews and obtained informed consent prior to beginning the interviews.

Recruiting FGD participants: The identification and recruitment of FGD participants was iterative. To begin, the research team randomly selected two villages from the research sites in TA Changata, where the ENGAGE project is working with both girl and CSO leaders. In each site, a trusted community member (a chief, school administrator, male champion, mothers' group member, etc.) was identified by GENET implementation staff. This person purposefully sampled a group of girls ages 15 to 17 who were not ENGAGE girl leaders. These girls were informed about the study and told that if they were interested in participating, they must inform their parents, who could come the next day to give informed consent. The next day, parents of interested girls were informed about the study and provided informed consent separately. Girls then returned and provided assent to participate. At the beginning of the two initial FGDs, participating girls identified and ranked in order of influence the major decision-makers for girls'

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[8] In Chiwalo (Arm 1), sites were randomized at the GVH level because there are only two girl leaders per village. Random selection for individual girl participants occurred among all girl leaders in the villages inside a GVH. In Changata (Arm 3), there were many more girl leaders at the village level, so villages were randomized. Random selection for individual girl participants occurred among all girl leaders in the selected villages.

marriage (reference groups). The first reference ranked was then chosen as the group of participants for the next FGD. In both sites, girls identified mothers and fathers as reference groups. In one site, they also identified uncles, while in the other they identified peer boys. Since there was not approval for another FGD with children under 18, young men ages 18 to 24 were sampled in place of peer boys. For all further FGDs, community stakeholders helped to find relevant participants and informed consent was obtained prior to the discussion.

Data preparation and Analysis

Following data collection, the research team transcribed and translated recordings of all the interviews. The translations were sent to ICRW, where the research team reviewed them for clarity and quality. This process took several months due to delays from holidays, natural disasters and quality checks.

Once the verbatim interview transcripts were received, they were uploaded into NVivo 11 and coded by a team of researchers from ICRW. Codes were developed based on the subject matter of the guides and focused on gaining a deeper understanding of girls' lives, child marriage, education, sexual and reproductive health and the ENGAGE project. Intercoder reliability was conducted on approximately 20 percent of transcripts for each interview participant type. After all transcripts were coded, the research team reviewed the code reports to identify common themes.

Participant Demographics

In total, 119 individuals in four TAs and two districts participated in the midline evaluation (46 interview participants and 73 focus group participants). Demographic information is presented below in **Tables 2-5.**

Table 2: Girl Leaders Demographic Information

Traditional Authority	Grade	Household Head	ENGAGE Cohort
Changata	Standard 7: 2 Standard 8: 2 Form 1: 1 Form 2: 2 Form 3: 3	Parents: 7 Mother only: 1 Other: 2	Cohort 1: 8 Cohort 2: 2
Chiwalo	Standard 5: 1 Standard 7: 3 Standard 8: 3 Form 1: 2 Form 4: 1	Parents: 3 Mother only: 3 Other: 3 None: 1	Cohort 1: 8 Cohort 2: 2

Table 3: CSO Leaders Demographic Information

Gender	Age Range	Cohort
Female: 4 Male: 6	20s: 3 30s: 5 40s: 1 50s: 1	Cohort 1: 8 Cohort 2: 2

Table 4: Key Informants Demographic Information

Gender	Age Range	Role in Community
Female: 5 Male: 11	30s: 7 40s: 5 60s: 2 80s: 1 Preferred not to report: 1	Traditional leader (TA, GVH, VH): 5 Community Leader: 3 Health Service Provider: 2 Initiation Counselor: 2 Male Champion: 2 Court Clerk: 1 Teacher/Head teacher: 1

Table 5: Focus Group Discussion Demographics

Participant Type	Number of Participants
Girls, age 15 - 17	18 (2 groups)
Mothers of girls 10 - 17	20 (2 groups)
Fathers of girls 10 - 17	19 (2 groups)
Uncles of girls 10 - 17	7 (1 group)
Young men, age 18 - 21	9 (1 group)

Results

This results section is organized into two parts, reflecting the two key objectives of the qualitative midline. The first part presents the themes related to perceptions of girls' lives in these communities, including marriage, sexual and reproductive health and education. In the second part, we describe results related to the implementation of the ENGAGE program in the communities, including participants' reflections on the successes and challenges related to programming.

Part 1: Themes related to girls' lives in Thyolo and Phalombe Districts

Theme 1: "Adolescent girls in the community we work in face a lot of challenges in life.[9]": Challenges in Girls' Daily Experience

Research participants were asked to describe what daily life was like for girls in their communities. Most participants describe girls' lives as fraught with challenges including poverty, limitations on mobility, threats of violence and abuse, gendered expectations to fulfill traditional domestic roles, school dropout, unintended pregnancy and early marriage.

> *"Most girls live a miserable life."* Girl Leader, Changata, age 17, Form 3

> **"Generally, lives of adolescent girls are struck by a range of challenges such as poverty and harmful cultural practices which render them vulnerable to all sorts of vices such as pre-marital sex, unplanned pregnancies, dropping out of school and child marriage."** Male CSO Leader

Participants reflected on a range of demands on girls' time, including chores and household care responsibilities:

> *"They [girls] do house chores like taking care of their siblings, washing dishes, mopping the house, doing laundry and sweeping."* Girl Leader, Changata, age 17, Form 2

Participants listed few activities that girls could be involved in outside of housework and schoolwork.

According to many participants, poverty is the ultimate driver of the challenges in girls' lives. When there is a lack of resources in the home, participants report that it is girls who sacrifice or are sacrificed to support themselves and their families. In addition to poverty, participants described that girls are surrounded by violence, including harassment, abuse, neglect and rape. This violence occurs at home with parents, at school with peers and teachers, at initiation camps, at places where girls are employed and out in their communities.

> *"Girls who are in school are maltreated by their teachers. Some girls are bullied by their fellow learners. This usually happens to orphans because they do not have anyone to take care of them hence, they look shabby and their friends laugh at them. This makes such girls to drop out of school."* Girl Leader, Chiwalo, age 17, Form 1

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[9] Male CSO Leader

"We [girls] live in danger, boys propose love to us and when we refuse, they beat us or scare us." Girl Leader, Changata, age 17, Form 2

"[My parents were] beating me and also giving me no food the whole day, afternoon and evening. I was just eating at friends' houses." Girl Leader, Chiwalo, age 15, Standard 5

Sexual violence and the threat and experience of rape were frequently reported. To exist in this environment, several participants noted that girls are taught to protect themselves:

"Girls of my age have to protect themselves in terms of diseases and also avoid walking at night to avoid being raped and we also have to obey our parents."
Girl Leader, Changata, age 16, Standard 7

Other daily challenges for girls mentioned by participants—including child marriage, school drop-out, and harmful traditional practices—are reflected on as separate themes in the sections that follow.

Although significant challenges surround girls, participants noted some opportunities in girls' lives. A few participants mentioned that some parents and chiefs are committed to and supportive of girls' education and delaying marriage. Another member of the community mentioned the plethora of NGOs in their communities, working to get girls back in school and creating opportunities for empowerment through girls' clubs (see **Appendix B** for full list of services mentioned). In fact, several key informants noted the increased organizational commitments to girls, to the point where they could not remember the names of all the organizations they had heard of. Much of this work was around education, which several key informants saw as central to work with girls.

Theme 2: "There is change … but to say the truth, child marriage is still a major problem in this area[10]": Child Marriage in Phalombe and Thyolo Districts

All participants noted that child marriage is or has been an issue in their communities. While some participants noted that child marriage had completely stopped, others concurred that child marriage is still occurring, and has several consequences, including school dropout and early pregnancy.

"There is no change. It is one of the practices that is now an unchanging behavior in this community." Girl Leader, Changata, age 17, Form 3

Research participants described a broad range of typical ages at marriage. Fourteen, fifteen and sixteen were the most commonly shared ages at which girls were married, with some noting

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[10] Female CSO Leader

that girls could marry as young as thirteen in more remote areas. Boys were more frequently married in their late teens or early twenties, though there was some disagreement around whether girls generally married near-peer boys or older, wealthy men.

Drivers of marriage

There were several different answers given by participants when asked about what kind of girls get married young and about the reasons for early marriage. The most frequently mentioned reasons for girls to get married young were poverty, unintended pregnancy, and peer pressure, which are described in more detail below:

Poverty: Participants noted that poverty was a driver of child marriage, both directly and indirectly. Once a girl reaches puberty, participants explained, she comes to be perceived as an adult, responsible for providing for herself. If girls do not have adequate opportunities for income to fund their school tuition and feed themselves, they may turn to older sexual partners who can fulfill their financial needs. According to participants, a girl in this situation may get married or engage in transactional sex, which can result in an unintended pregnancy and lead to marriage, as discussed below.

"In our community, once a girl starts her menstruation period she is considered grown up. Thus, it believed that she is now capable of finding her needs on her own and the main source by is indulging herself in a boy-girl relationship where the man becomes the provider of the girl's needs." Male Teacher, Changata

"When the parents also see that the girl has a boyfriend, who gives her money and provides groceries to the family, they encourage her to get married to the man even at a tender age." Mother, FGD participant

"Poverty is a leading cause of child marriage. Some parents and girls think marriage is only way to escape poverty." Male Traditional Leader, Changata

Participants noted that poverty was also a consequence of child marriage, particularly when girls marry young, unemployed boys. By getting married and having children at a young age, the couple introduces additional financial pressures onto a family which may not be able to support them.

"These are pathetic marriages, the boys who marry the girls do not even have the muscle to support the girls they have married they are even solely dependent on the parents." Male Traditional Leader, Mchilamwela

Unintended Pregnancy: Participants frequently cited pregnancy as a direct driver of child marriage. There was a general belief that girls who became pregnant should marry the man or boy who impregnated her. However, this was not always the case. Several participants reported

that boys who impregnated girls would deny their role in the pregnancy. According to some participants, a girl who had become pregnant might also marry because of financial reasons – if her parents could not or would not care for her and her child, they might insist on a marriage to ensure that financial responsibility is placed on the father or his family.

> *"Mostly, girls are forced into marriage [as] a result of unintended pregnancies. When a girl is pregnant, she is automatically forced into marriage."* Male Traditional Leader, Changata

Peer pressure: When unintended pregnancy or poverty drive girls to marry young, they become negative role models that, according to some participants, drive their friends and classmates to marriage. If a girl marries a wealthy man, her friends may see that the marriage has been beneficial – her wants and needs are met. According to some participants, boyfriends or husbands lend girls status that may be desirable. This encourages more girls to get married.

> *"Sometimes a friend can have a sexual relationship and seems to enjoy. She is given money and the other girl may desire that. She gets into a sexual relationship as well and gets unwanted pregnancy and gets married."* Girl, FGD participant

This expanded to parents as well – just as girls were envious of their married friends, parents who saw their friends marry off their daughters became eager to do the same.

> *"Sometimes is that as parents we get influence [sic] when the husband to our friend's child is doing fine so we also wish that then mine should also get married seeing how her friend is doing."* Mother, FGD participant

Decision-makers of girls who get married young

Participants were asked who makes decisions for girls ages 10 to 17 in terms of when and whom they marry. In response, participants listed parents, particularly mothers (as fathers were often not present at home when such decisions are made), and girls themselves. Many participants said that girls had the opportunity to choose who they married.

> *"The one who has a decision for a girl to get married here in our community is the girl herself, she starts it by finding a man out there and bring [sic] him home."* Father, FGD participant

Uncles were mentioned less frequently, but when mentioned their role in the decision-making process was highlighted. As one participant responded when asked about who makes decisions:

> *"Her [the girl's] uncle, together with the mother. They make the final decision for the girl even if she disagrees with the position."* Male Teacher, Changata

Chiefs were also described by several participants as being involved in these decisions, usually in that they stop decisions to marry children, but sometimes as approvers of the marriage. In addition to mothers, girls themselves, uncles and chiefs, other key reference groups—i.e. groups whose opinions matter when it comes to girls' marriages—included boys and initiation counselors.

Theme 3: "We have introduced by-laws to fight child marriage because we now understand that child marriage is a crime[11]": By-laws and sanctions related to child marriage behavior

In several communities, participants mentioned that new by-laws had been implemented to attempt to stop child marriages from occurring. According to them, by-laws can but do not always include a range of monetary and livestock fines for child marriages and set a minimum age for marriage, depending of the community, of between 18 and 21 for girls (often higher ages for boys). In some communities, there were codified rules around adolescent pregnancy with fines or punishments for impregnation of unmarried girls. Several individuals (who were not chiefs) noted that the chiefs do not appear to be taking fines for personal gain but are reinvesting them in the communities, particularly education for orphan children, although at least one alluded to corruption by chiefs related to these fines.

Midline evaluation participants identified chiefs as the key implementors of the by-laws, with support from the police, social welfare officers, mothers' groups and the girl leaders. Chiefs and other adults described working with other authorities, such as the Village Development Committees (VDCs), to enforce laws. Chiefs were the most frequently cited group by participants when asked who child marriage cases could be brought to, followed by police, social welfare officers and girl leaders. Some girl leaders described a process by which complaints would be brought to them or to mothers' groups, then they or the mothers would take the reported cases to the chief, who might escalate a case to the police. One girl leader explains that a girl who is facing marriage is:

"Required to go to girl leaders or mother group who takes the matter to the village chiefs and the chiefs summons the girl's parents if they are not listening to the girl leaders or mother group."
Girl Leader, Changata, age 16, Form 3

Participants frequently said that girls facing marriage would themselves report to chiefs or girl leaders about the attempted marriage. Other times, community members determine a marriage had occurred when a girl becomes pregnant or drops out of school, and then they would report the marriage. In some communities, chiefs had established investigative groups composed mainly of mothers for this purpose. Once a marriage was reported, a posse of locals that

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[11] Community leader from Changata

included chiefs and other highly respected community members sometimes went to break up the marriage.

There was disagreement about the efficacy of new laws against child marriage and the extent of change in the communities as a result of these laws. Traditional leaders (village heads, group village heads and TAs) and ADC Chairs tended to be optimistic about the extent of change, while teachers, child protection officers, CSO leaders and other community leaders felt there was less change. Girl leaders were split. Many people noted that chiefs did not always implement the laws accurately and suggested that nepotism could be an issue.

> *"[When a child marriage case arises] they [people in the village] investigate why the girls got married, the girl and the man are taken to the chiefs together with their parents, when some are stubborn they pay fines in form of chickens and then the story slowly ends, some are just left to do as they please. If the people are related to the chiefs the story slowly ends, too."*
> Girl Leader, Changata, age 16, Form 3

CSO leaders often believed improper enforcement of the by-laws was due to unclear responsibility structures. They felt that even though many of the by-laws had existed for a long time there was no enforcement because no one was held accountable for enforcing the laws. Yet despite this skepticism, there was some indication that new by-laws related to marriage and pregnancy are changing the behavior of boys.

> *"Now with the change of laws we ask all of them [the pregnant girl and her boyfriend] to stop going to school until the child is born. The parents of the boy are responsible of [sic] taking care of the girl until the girl is able to get back to school. This is making a lot of boys not to be giving [sic] young girls pregnancy. The dissemination of information has also brought some change in the behavior of boys."* Male Community Leader, Mchilamwela

When the community finds out about child marriages, research participants reported that the parents may be arrested and fined, but they may also face community stigma or may be taken aside for a discussion of the issues with child marriage. If they call off the marriage that might be enough to stop receiving sanctions, or it might be escalated to fines and imprisonment.

> *"[When the community learns about a marriage] they are concerned and if it happens that a woman or a man has forced a girl into marriage they are shouted at, they feel so ashamed."*
> Girl Leader, Changata, age 15, Form 1

Despite facing these sanctions, parents who wanted to marry their daughters off would sanction their daughters through abuse if the girls refused. Participants reported that girls who refuse to marry might not be given enough food or would be assigned a plot of land too large for them to farm. Sometimes they would be forced out from home, driving them to live with other relatives or

to marry a man with whom they could live for support. Caught between pressures from their parents to marry, information about the consequences of marriage and mixed feelings about child marriage in the community, girls forced into marriage suffer mental health challenges, including suicidal thoughts.

> *"…parents were enlightened on the bad effects of child marriage but are still forcing their daughter to marriage [sic], she becomes psychologically disturbed and easily think [sic] of committing suicide and at times she just reports to the police/chief."*
> Girl Leader, Changata, age 17, Form 3

Theme 4: "You are labeled as a prostitute[12]": Girls' sexual and reproductive health and access to family planning

Most participants noted that adolescent pregnancy is a serious issue in their community, one that directly links to school dropout and early marriage. Nearly all participants reported that sexual activity among girls is commonplace, though there were differing interpretations of the type of relationship in which that activity takes place. Some spoke of boy-girl relationships, while others referred to girls that were engaged in "prostitution." Many participants—especially adults but in some cases, girls themselves—referred to girls who were in sexual relationships as "bad" girls. Regardless of how it was discussed by participants, transactional sex takes places in these communities, especially among girls with few resources.

> *"Some girls in our community are selfish but some are good girls with good behavior. Many girls engage in sexual relations with men and boys in exchange for money due to lack of basic necessities at home which their parents can't afford."* Girl Leader, Chiwalo, age 15, Standard 7

Other reasons given by participants for sexual activity and pregnancy among girls included attendance at sexual initiation camps, particularly when girls underwent sexual cleansing– a practice in which girls have sex with an older man (called a *fisi*) in preparation for marriage and sexual maturity. Girls were reported to become pregnant either as a direct result of this practice, or because the exposure to information about sex and the sense that they had reached adulthood drove them to engage in sexual relationships upon returning home.

> *"At the camps, they are taught the things that changes them and makes them think like they are women [sic], telling them what is expected of them in marriage. So what happens is that, the girls once they come back, they want to try out. In the process of trying out, they get pregnant. And pregnancy is one way of getting married early."* Girl Leader, Chiwalo, age 16, Standard 8

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[12] Girl Leader, Changata, 15, Standard 8

Other girls became pregnant after being raped. Pressure to have sex came from employers, who might threaten a girl's job if she refused, or stepfathers, who could withhold school fees.

"[Girls] who work in the [tea] estates, they are very vulnerable because of their age, and in terms of them securing and sustaining the job. Some of them are forced into sex as a way of keeping their jobs while some are being raped." Male CSO Leader

Nearly all participants were able to identify the negative consequences of unprotected sexual activity, including unintended pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, and for those who become pregnant, fistula. Yet, barriers to sexual and reproductive health services were noted by most participants, including access to and use of contraception. One frequently mentioned barrier was that services were inaccessible. Participants were asked several questions about married and unmarried girls' experience accessing and receiving sexual and reproductive health services in their communities, especially family planning services. Most participants reported that married girls were able to access services and use family planning. However, participants were split on the question of whether unmarried girls could access services: while a few reported there were no issues, many suggested that unmarried girls faced significant barriers. Girl leaders confirmed that rumors that girls using family planning are prostitutes and norms around not using family planning until fertility is proven are major challenges:

"The people [in the community] never trust you and they will always have questions on why you are accessing [family planning] services while you don't have a husband… You are labeled as a prostitute because they believe if you don't have multiple partners there is no need of accessing family planning services." Girl Leader, Changata, age 15, Standard 8

"[Unmarried girls who use contraception] are condemned and judged and deemed as prostitutes. And are told that contraceptives are for the married people. And they are stigmatized." Girl Leader, Chiwalo, age 16, Standard 8

If an unmarried girl tries to access sexual and reproductive health services:

"people will laugh at her and ask what is she trying to do [sic] as if she knows if she is fertile or not and they will advise her to try and see if she can reproduce first."
Girl Leader, Changata, age 15, Form 1

Adult participants corroborated the stigma around adolescent girls' use of sexual and reproductive health services in these communities:

"Girls are not allowed to get condoms from the hospital until now because they are taken as prostitutes." Female CSO Leader

Participants reported that the stigma against unmarried girls' contraceptive use is driven by authority figures, such as chiefs and parents, who do not want to appear to be promoting prostitution or sexual activity.

When a girl uses contraceptives, *"she gets exiled, because the village head clearly says that there shouldn't be any girl who haven't [sic] reached conceiving age using any family planning services because it would seem like encouraging them to practice prostitution, because they would say for us not to get pregnant we should use family planning methods so the village head is against that."* Girl Leader, Chiwalo, age 17, Standard 8

When unmarried girls access contraceptives "*they are shouted by their parents [sic] and told that if you are on contraceptives you should find elsewhere to stay*." Girl Leader, Chiwalo, age 15, Standard 5

"We don't really talk about that [contraception] to the girls much because we believe if we talk about it, we might stir their interest in having sex…." Male Community Leader, Chiwalo

Another barrier to use of contraception among adolescent girls, frequently mentioned by girl leaders, is widespread misconception about how methods work, including the myth that contraceptives cause infertility. One girl leader reported that this meant girls would not use contraceptives for fear of losing the interest of romantic partners.

"*Because the contraceptives can, if [I] am taking them and I have never given birth it can cause me if I would want a baby when I get married to struggle in conceiving.*"
Girl Leader, Changata, age 17, Form 3*"There is awareness on how girls can protect themselves from sex and unintended pregnancies. But the problem is that some girls do not heed advice such as on condom use. We have heard there is a female condom but most young people do not make use of them due to myths and misconceptions."* Male Traditional Leader, Changata

"*Girls are told not to tell men/boys because they lose interest if they know a girl is on modern family planning methods because she won't bear children in future*"
Girl Leader, Chiwalo, age 16, Standard 7

Theme 5: "Getting enrolled in school and being educated is the only opportunity[13]": Girls' education is identified as important, but girls face significant barriers to education.

All participants felt that girls' education was instrumental to girls leading better lives. Education is seen is the primary, sometimes even the only way for girls to improve their lives. Chiefs have become major promoters of education, according to participants. Girl leaders frame chiefs'

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[13] Girl Leader, Changata, 17, Form 3

support of girls' education in terms of child marriage, often stating that they knew chiefs supported girls' education because they are making such a push to end marriage. There is a lot of support for girls' education from various NGOs and government schemes operating in the districts both to reduce school dropout through supplying bursaries and to encourage readmittance for girls who have dropped out.

Despite supportive attitudes and efforts around girls' education, the reality—according to all participant types—is that girls still frequently drop out of school due to pregnancy and marriage. One frequently mentioned challenge to school attendance was sexual violence and harassment from teachers and students. A few participants described how both teachers and boys sexually harass girls at school, especially as they enter puberty. In addition, it was mentioned that teachers are engaged in sexual relationships with their young, female students. In a context where harassment and violence are normalized at school, dropping out is a commonplace reaction.

"Girls also experience violence from teachers and boys at school. Violence of sexual and verbal nature are very common. For example, an adolescent girl whose breasts have grown big is likely to be told to get married so that she can breast feed her baby and boys sometimes decide to touch their buttocks at will. All this is violence, but girls sometimes can't speak out because it is seen to be normal and sometimes, they are just afraid to do so." Male CSO Leader

Even ridicule and the feeling of being judged can cause dropout, according to one girl from Chiwalo:

"Even at school, we face a lot of challenges. Teachers too sometimes they have a tendency of undermining girl's abilities and judgement in class. Sometimes, even amongst ourselves as learners, some people ridicule you. They call you names, "such as -you are too old, you have big breasts". So some girls drop out so that they don't continue to experience this and go get married." Girl Leader, Chiwalo, age 16, Standard 8

Poverty, and a related need for girls to work inside or outside the home, was also a reason for girls to leave school. Several girls were forced to leave school in order to care for their younger siblings or do "piecemeal" work.

Some participants described peers who were forced to drop out of school because their parents placed greater value on the education of their brothers.

"Some prefer to pay school fees for the boys and leaving the girls, they say that girls don't have future [sic] they can get pregnant and that the boy will stay in school, so it's better to pay for the boy whilst girls stay at home." Girl Leader, Changata, age 15, Form 1

Another reason given for girls' dropout was framed as a preference of fledgling relationships and material necessities over education:

"*Once a girl's focus is on monetary benefit, she is no longer interested in school but focuses on boy-girl relationships, which is a killer of their dreams. Therefore, there is less determination in education. This is one of the biggest challenges we have in this community. Such girls prefer selling their body to men [rather than] attending school." *Female Initiation Counselor, Nazombe

Theme 6: "We have been discouraged to continue the traditional camps because we have witnessed the effects it has on girls[14]": Effects of harmful traditional practices and the community response

Participants, especially ENGAGE girl and CSO leaders, reported that traditionally girls in Southern Malawi are expected to attend initiation camps when they reach puberty. These ceremonies serve to celebrate and facilitate a girl's transition to adulthood. Participants described two distinct camps: those run by traditional initiation counselors, and those run by religious groups. Traditional camps focus on teaching girls how to have sex – with emphasis on male pleasure – as well as about puberty, sexual maturity, adolescence and menstrual hygiene. According to participants, they are also taught traditional practices related to sexuality and menstrual health – for instance, that girls should not put salt in food while menstruating. Attendees dance and sing "obscene" songs and may also undergo sexual cleansing. Some participants noted that physical and sexual abuse happens at the camps, with girls being beaten and slapped and forced to undress.

Participants described that religious camps have similar intentions around facilitating girls' journey through puberty. They are intended to focus on providing girls with age-appropriate information, including menstrual hygiene and the importance of education, as well as dressing modestly and behaving properly. At these camps run by churches, participants described that girls are separated by age. Although some participants saw distinct differences between these traditional and religious camps, others noted little difference between them except that religious camps did not encourage sexual cleansing.

Participants appeared mixed on their opinions about these camps.

"On the good things they are told to give respect to parents but on the bad things they are told to do sexual cleansing (kusasa fumbi) and they are also taught to be rude parents."
Girl Leader, Changata, age 15, Standard 7

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[14] Male Traditional Leader, Changata

However, nearly all participants noted that sexual cleansing practices at the camps have serious consequences, including commencement of sexual relationships, motherhood, and early marriage. Participants shared stories of young girls contracting diseases and becoming pregnant after the ritual, which led to serious health consequences and dropping out of school.

A few participants mentioned that some girls in the community pride themselves in having been initiated—believing it means they have reached adulthood. Participants perceived that some girls are eager to "try out" the sexual behaviors they learn at the camp. Several participants mentioned that the songs, dances and practices taught in the camps inspire girls to engage in "immoral behavior," including promiscuity and even prostitution.

Though initiation camps had been common in the past, many participants described significant and recent changes. Sexual cleansing and other harmful practices, some reported, are no longer common and traditional camps have largely been replaced by the religious ones. However, there were mixed perceptions about whether some of the practices taught at these camps are still happening, as is seen from these two girls from the same TA:

> *"Harmful traditional practices such as Kusasa fumba [Note: sexual cleansing, where young and newly initiated girls are told to have sex to cleanse evil spirits], Fisi [Note: Hyena is a man who is hired to teach young girls how to have sex] - Most of these stopped and we learn about them in school I have never seen that happen here."*
> Girl Leader, Changata, age 16, Form 3

> *"Furthermore, what I have just learned recently as a traditional practice in our areas is so pathetic. A girl is supposed to first sleep/have sex with her father once she starts her menstruation period…It is a silent cultural practice that once the daughter comes out of her puberty and has started menstruating, she will have to sleep with her biological father. This practice is very common."* Girl Leader, Changata, age 17, Form 3

Part 2: The ENGAGE program in Thyolo and Phalombe Districts

In this section, we present information about the ENGAGE intervention through three themes: girls' empowerment and CSO capacity building; successes of ENGAGE; and challenges. As above when we refer to "participants" in this section, we are not discussing exclusively ENGAGE participants but rather those individuals participating in the midline research study, which include participants of ENGAGE and other individuals in the communities.

Theme 1: Girls' Empowerment and CSO Capacity Building

Empowerment is a critical tenet of the ENGAGE program and the primary means through which the project aims to effect change. All participating CSO leaders and girl leaders were asked to

reflect on their experience with or on the project. This included questions related to the role they see themselves playing in the work in their communities, along with other how they perceive themselves through the work.

Girls' Empowerment: On the whole, participants reflected that through ENGAGE, girls have increased their agency, confidence and self-esteem, leading them to feel more empowered. Specifically, girls reported feeling more assured to turn down marriage proposals and relationships and focus on their education. The training that girl leaders received through ENGAGE, as perceived by girl leader participants and those that work with them, has allowed them to serve as role models in their communities and for their peers. For example, some girls said that they felt they have been able to support other girls to go back to school, through either encouragement or financial support that they helped to raise through the girls' clubs. Others reported that ENGAGE girl leaders were a resource for girls who were being forced into marriage. Their role in ENGAGE seems to have granted them, at least in the eyes of participants in this research, some sense of authority and trust from their communities.

"Because we are trained our fellow girls believe what we tell them and listen to us when we visit them to discuss and discourage child marriages." Girl Leader, Chiwalo, age 15, Standard 7

Some girl leader participants from Chiwalo stated that ENGAGE has taught them not to be in relationships, which they saw as beneficial aspect of the program:

"I have learnt a lot of things such as not getting married while we are young but also to be exemplary because if we do things contrary to what we teach other girls will stop listening to us.… The training helped us to be exemplary because some of the girls who went to the training have boyfriends. After we got back from summer camp, most girls changed and ended their relationships." Girl Leader, Chiwalo, age 15, Standard 7

Many girl participants highlighted the importance of GENET's training in building their capacity to work with other girls. Specifically, girl participants highlighted the trainings on the negative consequences of child marriage as particularly salient, both because it helped them understand the problem and because it provided them with information to teach others. Additionally, girls thought that the public speaking training they received was valuable. They also said they learned self-confidence from the summer camps, with one explaining that before ENGAGE:

"I was looking down upon myself, and if I had an answer to a question at school I could not stand up because I was very shy and I did not know that I have rights on my own but when GENET came am able [sic] to know that every girl has a right and now I stopped looking down upon myself." Girl Leader, Changata, age 17, Form 3Girl participants described the knowledge and skills acquired through ENGAGE as a component of their empowerment.

"Before attending summer camp, I did not know what constitutes an abuse but now I do. I also did not know the negative effects of child marriages, for example, fistula. I am empowered and no one can cheat me into getting married now." Girl Leader, Changata, age 17, Form 2

"We've been equipped with knowledge and skills which we did not have to help our friends."
Girl Leader, Chiwalo, age 15, Standard 7

Some CSO leaders noted the effect of ENGAGE on girls' capacity for leadership. This could be seen in a difference between girls they worked with in Changata—where girls received ENGAGE training—and those in Mchiramwera, where girls were not trained by ENGAGE. One CSO leader reported that girls in Changata are more unified and "speak with one voice," which made them easier to work with (CSO Leader, Male, 31). According to another CSO leader:

"Our work has been very easy in T/A where these girl leaders exist than the other T/A where girl empowerment is not done because here the people are confused because they do not have the skills and capacity for girls to know themselves and problems they are going through…. On the other hand, [in] the other T/A most girls don't have confidence, they cannot voice out issues and they do not know the importance of education and preventing violence/abuse they meet in life." Female CSO Leader

Other participants noted stark, inherent differences between girls in TA Changata as compared to TA Mchirawera.

"The girls that are in Changata many of them seem to have desire to go further with their education and they are also willing to progress in their everyday life. While when we take those people that are in Mchiramwera, many girls seem not to have passion on education..."
Female CSO Leader

CSO Leaders' Capacity Building: CSO leaders interviewed for this research discussed the technical skills they developed through ENGAGE, particularly around public speaking and advocacy, including knowing which groups to target and how to engage them. Like the girl leaders, CSO leaders believed that the program had increased their confidence and self-esteem, leading them to be better advocates for girls' rights. Through being part of ENGAGE, these community leaders discovered the importance of giving girls platforms from which to advocate for themselves, recognizing the importance and effectiveness of elevating girls' voices.

CSO leaders also noted they have learned grant proposal writing and how to manage a project to meet donor requirements, which they see as valuable capacity building for future work. One participant noted they have already gained professional standing.

Theme 2: Opportunities and successes

Participants were directly asked what they perceived as the successes of and opportunities brought by ENGAGE in their communities.

Positive changes in community related to child marriage and girls' education:
Overwhelmingly, participants described significant improvements around child marriage and girls' education since the arrival of ENGAGE in their communities. Many claimed that child marriage had been completely eradicated, and others described meaningful decreases. One girl leader from Changata reported that annually, cases have dropped from between 40 and 50 to between 20 and 30, as a direct result of the program.

"I like [the program] a lot because we don't have child marriage cases in our community, child marriages have ended which makes a lot of people to think deeply before making decisions of venturing into marriages, as they do have role models amongst our community. This portrays a good picture of our community." Girl Leader Changata, age 15, Form 1

"The most important and first opportunity is the coming of GENET in our community. It has enlightened [people in the community]. Without GENET these girls would have not known the dangers of child marriage, same with the chiefs. We could have been letting these children get into child marriages." Female Traditional Leader, Chiwalo

Participants likewise reported an increase in girls' school attendance. This included both the readmission of girls who had dropped out and an increased acceptance of married girls attending school. Participants also conveyed that girls were working harder and doing better in school.

"Things are improving bit by bit. For example, there is increased school attendance. The numbers of girls are increasing…. This means that parents and other communities are realizing the importance of sending their girls to school." Male Traditional Leader, Changata

These improvements in the lives of girls were, according to participants, due to shifts in community attitudes around child marriage and girls' education, especially around increasing knowledge of the dangers of child marriage.

"There is massive awareness of the negative impact of child marriage such as on girls' health and economic wellbeing, which has seen a substantial number of girls to remain in school."
Male CSO Leader

Several girl participants mentioned that the broad changes in attitudes and knowledge in their communities were improved sexual and reproductive health access for adolescents:

"A lot of things have changed; girls as young as 13-year olds would be pregnant. But not anymore. Girls are able to access contraceptives when they know that they are sexually active. And there is less judgement unlike in the past." Girl Leader, Chiwalo, age 16, Standard 8

Improvements to initiation camps—especially around what is taught—were mentioned as a success of ENGAGE's work in these communities. According to participants (mostly the CSO leaders), ENGAGE's work with initiation counselors has aimed to remove explicit content and language from the curricula, shifting the focus of the camp completely and banning practices like sexual cleansing. Others noted that only older girls are allowed to attend the camps, though the actual age at which girls are allowed to attend is unclear – some participants said 15 or 16, but others said only those over 18 were allowed to attend. In addition, the camps seem to have reduced both in duration (from seven days to one) and in number, with fewer girls going to initiation camps at all, choosing instead to be initiated in their homes by initiation counsellors in some cases, or by female relatives.

"With the knowledge we have been equipped with by GENET the practice of initiation ceremonies Chinamwali (initiation ceremonies) and Kusasa fumbi (sexual cleansing) have ended. The initiation counselors have been advised to teach girls only those things that are appropriate for their age." Male Champion, Chiwalo

Even change-makers like chiefs, initiation counselors and other local leaders reportedly are now more aware of the harmful effects of child marriage and initiation camps. These communities have witnessed more engagement, dialogue, commitment and action on these critical issues affecting girls and ENGAGE has, interviewees reported, built local capacity for change, accountability of decision-makers and ability to coordinate across a diverse group of actors.

Lastly, as was discussed in the previous section, participants reflected on how girls' rights have increased, including their ability to refuse marriage.

"The good thing our club has done is letting girls know how they are and now when a boy asks one's hand in marriage they are able to turn them down knowing it won't help them in anyway." Girl, Chiwalo, age 17, Standard 8

Factors Contributing to ENGAGE Success: Several factors were reported as contributing to the success of the project, including multidimensional support for girls and the engagement of the broader community.

Chiefs were recognized as the key change-agents of the success of ENEGAGE thus far in these communities. In communities where chiefs were open-minded to ENGAGE, participants seemed to report on more successes. Parents, and mothers' groups in particular, also contributed to building community support for ENGAGE and for the program's messaging. This

was seen as critical, especially at the onset of the program when there were misconceptions about ENGAGE's objectives. Both girl leaders and CSO leaders also involved other community members like police officers on legal matters when necessary, such as when they learned of an underage marriage.

Girl leaders participating in this midline research explained that GENET's ongoing encouragement was vital in helping them overcome the challenges they faced in conducting their work. This was specifically noted in light of push-back from the community or their peers, when the girl leaders saw GENET as a major source of support. In addition to saying GENET encouraged them in their advocacy work, girl participants thought it was very important that GENET also encouraged them to stay in school and continue their education.

> *"We have been really helped and encouraged [by GENET]. And we have been told that we are changing things, this really encourages us…. Through all this support, we are able to gather courage and follow up on girls."* Girl, Chiwalo, age 16, Standard 8

The CSO leaders have also become important supporters for the girls' work, following the girls' direction. As one CSO leader said, "at this organization we put [the girl leaders] in charge of activities as leaders and we follow their lead" (Male CSO Leader).

Theme 3: Challenges to and of ENGAGE's work

A few challenges and road blocks to successful implementation of the program were discussed by participants. These challenges fell into the categories of continued community resistance (including violence and harassment) and an inability to respond to the widespread problem of child marriage with appropriate urgency and resources.

ENGAGE girls experiencing violence and harassment: Many participants reported that girl leaders have occasionally faced violence and harassment while conducting ENGAGE activities. Violence and harassment came from various people, including the parents of girls they were attempting to work with – either in clubs or through home visits – who would chase them away, using obscene language and insulting the girl leaders. A few participants even mentioned being physically beaten or were concerned that community members wanted to inflict physical harm on them. Sometimes, it was other from the community who were not involved in the clubs who were violent and harassing.

> *"We've been chased and cursed and even insulted by the married girl's parents."*
> Girl Leader, Chiwalo, age 15, Standard 7

Social and community-level challenges: Interviews revealed somewhat mixed perceptions of ENGAGE by the broader community, with more negative perceptions at the onset of

programming and increased positive perceptions as time went on. Although initially some community members were skeptical, support and encouragement of ENGAGE grew with time – as participants noted, some were reluctant to support ENGAGE at the start of the implementation period but by the time of midline data collection, attitudes were more positive.

> *"Most [people in the community] were hostile towards us saying we just drink Fanta and eat snacks for ourselves at the club…at first people said GENET is satanic they will be sucking our blood. But they later understood and accepted the project."*
> Girl Leader, Changata, age 16, Form 3

Despite progress, some participants suggested that negative perceptions persist. According to several participants including girl and CSO leaders, there was a general sense that community members were reluctant to accept sexual activity among adolescent girls and therefore unlikely to support their access to SRH services or information. Some girl leaders, key informants and CSO leaders feared that there was a perception that the project was promoting prostitution among girls. Other reasons given for resistance included concerns that program participants were interfering with "family matters" and that they were a threat to authority figures:

> *"The challenges come in form of resistance that we meet from… chiefs or initiation counsellors. We are seen as a threat to the authority and power the community leaders hold."*
> Male CSO Leader

Chiefs and GVHs were viewed as playing a crucial role in the community-wide acceptance of the program, as people often looked to these leaders when deciding whether to support ENGAGE. The reliance on chiefs to effect change in the community was perceived as a potential drawback, as some chiefs were not supportive or uninclined to keep promises.

> *"Yes, some chiefs do not assist us accordingly. Sometimes they promise to mobilize the community for us but on the actual day for the campaign no one shows up."*
> Girl Leader, Chiwalo, age 17, Form 1

Several participants also suggested that initially, men were afraid of their program participants' authority and status in the community and were upset that no programming was offered for them.

A few participants also noted that ENGAGE's programming was challenged by an influx of mixed messages, both within the program itself and in the broader field of NGO work in the region. Mixed messages on topics related to child marriage, education and SRH issues for adolescents created confusion for community members, according to a few CSO leaders. For example, although some ENGAGE participants described learning how use of contraception

could be empowering in that it kept girls in school, others reported that they were being taught to avoid sexual and romantic relationships altogether.

Structural and resource challenges: Transportation and inaccessibility were barriers to successful implementation of ENGAGE that arose during midline interviews– particularly in very remote areas, as staff did not have the means to travel the required distances.

A few adult participants described the inability of ENGAGE to combat the full scope of child marriage in Malawi, given that the program only operates in a few communities, although the issue is widespread across both districts.

Other structural issues at the community level impeded progress. This included the lack of enforcement of existing laws and by-laws. Yet some of the newly created by-laws could be problematic:

"The most difficult group to work with were the community committees because when a girl is pregnant they were benefiting through the fines she was paying like goats and the like. So when we came in to emphasize on prevention of pregnancies they were not very keen to work with us." Male CSO Leader

Lastly, resource constraints were mentioned by a few CSO and girl leader participants. Participants perceived a shortage of resources within the communities in which ENGAGE works, including insufficient funding for current staff and delayed payments to CSO leaders. Some CSO leaders also reported that they received limited training and that their materials were available only in English. They also mentioned that smaller NGOs were not able to benefit from ENGAGE, as the program could not provide the necessary support and funding for them.

Discussion

This section is divided into three parts. In the first part, we discuss the overarching findings from this midline evaluation from the ENGAGE study communities. In the second part, we share insights on how, based on these midline evaluation findings, ENGAGE and other projects working in these communities can translate these insights into action. In the third part, we reflect on the strengths and limitations of this midline evaluation context and implications for future research.

Part 1: Girls' lives in ENGAGE study communities in Phalombe and Thyolo Districts

The drivers of child marriage are deeply interconnected

The midline findings point to the complex, interlocking relationship between multiple causes of child marriage including poverty, adolescent pregnancy, unmarried girls' inability to access to contraception, and challenges with school attendance and completion. Participants frequently reported that poverty and adolescent pregnancy were key drivers of child marriage, along with what participants described as "peer pressure." Poverty was often, but not always, a driver of adolescent pregnancy too, since some girls must engage in unprotected, transactional sex to fulfill their basic needs. Poverty and adolescent pregnancy also lead to school dropout; in either case, marriage often precedes or immediately follows. Some girls drop out of school because they get married; this was also seen fueling the myth that there is no point in supporting girls in school, since they will just get married. This myth drives marriage, as girls often married following school drop out if they were not supported.

Stigma against unmarried adolescent use of family planning and scrutiny toward sexually active girls—as described next—further drives pregnancy and child marriage.

Stigmatization of unmarried girls' sexual activity and access to family planning

All participant types hinted at the widespread stigma against girls who engage in sexual activity, despite recounting that most girls in their communities are sexually active. Girls who engaged in sex or had relationships with boys were described as "prostitutes" doing "bad" or "immoral" activities (conversely, "good" girls do not engage in sexual relationships). Transactional sexual relationships in which girls sleep with older men and young, employed men to get resources and food were reportedly common, though there are also frequent reports of sex with men and boys who are impoverished. In addition, participants spoke of girls who experience sexual violence and rape. Adults in these communities, according to participants, place strict parameters on what girls can do, where and when they can go, and what they can wear. Although these limitations were framed in the interviews as protective against sexual violence, these restrictions—along with others—are often couched as ways to prevent girls themselves choosing to engage in "immoral" sexual activity and engaging in relationships.

Relatedly, many participants in this study, including the key informants who provide youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health services, agreed that unmarried girls cannot access these services because they will be seen as prostitutes or putting their future fertility at risk. This, in conjunction with girls who are sexually active despite existing stigmas against sexual activity, likely contributes to the context of high adolescent pregnancy (and thus, child marriage) noted by nearly all participants.

Social norms around child marriage

The findings from the midline evaluation continue to suggest that child marriage is not a social norm in this communities and confirm findings from baseline (see **Appendix A**). Few, if any, participants said that girls are getting married because it is what is expected of them. If anything, these findings show—as did baseline findings—that the prevalence of child marriage is diminishing. However, child marriage is an attractive choice once a girl becomes pregnant or in an impoverished family (i.e. for prudential reasons) and social norms around adolescent pregnancy and sexual and reproductive health continue to create an environment where child marriage continues to exist.

Violence

The picture of girls' lives painted through these interviews shows a multitude of ways in which violence, harassment, abuse and neglect play a key role in child marriage and adolescent pregnancy. As girls push on the walls placed around them by existing social and gender norms, they often meet resistance. Even participation in NGO work, especially programs that are actively promoting social change, may put girls at higher risk of violence. This resistance and violence was noted by participants, especially girls leaders, as they participated in ENGAGE.

Enabling environments around adolescent girls

It is clear from these interviews that there are many factors in the surrounding environment that can facilitate or hinder girls' ability to stay in school and remain out of marriage during adolescence.

One of these factors is the existence and power of national laws and community by-laws related to child marriage, school attendance and sexual and reproductive health. It is apparent from participants that many such laws and by-laws exist and that community members are aware of these. By the time of this midline evaluation, nearly all communities had by-laws related to the age of marriage for girls being at least or higher than 18 years of age. Nascent by-laws on readmission policies aim to facilitate education opportunities for postpartum girls and pregnant girls. While some participants noted how integral these laws are for their work in the communities, others noted the efforts and gains but reflected on a lack of enforcement as a barrier to success.

However, while some by-laws appear to have good intentions, there is concern that others may have negative consequences, such as those that stigmatize girls (and families of girls) who become pregnant or get married under the age of 18. As attention around the ills of child marriage has blossomed in these communities, it is unclear how girls and families who deviate from the norm fare in the face of such stigma and penalization. This may serve to drive child marriage underground, but not to eradicate it. Additionally, as ENGAGE and other NGOs work to keep girls out of sexual relationships—even as a protection measure for keeping girls in school—there may be negative consequences.

Part 2: Recommendations for ENGAGE and other NGO's working on adolescent issues in these communities

It is apparent from the midline evaluation findings that positive change is happening in these communities and appears at least partially attributable to the ENGAGE program. Child marriage is on the decline, as are harmful and traditional practices and the initiation camps where they are taught. Girls are returning to school after pregnancy and fewer girls are dropping out in the first place. Girl leaders, CSO leaders and community stakeholders felt that these changes are a direct result from the efforts of the ENGAGE program.

It is also clear that the ENGAGE approach of empowerment has been having positive impacts, on the girls and CSO leaders participating in the program, which has resulted in positive impacts for the community at large. Girls' knowledge and skills have increased. They report feeling confident to lead their clubs and to meet with stakeholders in their communities--including chiefs, one of the communities' most powerful change agents—to talk about their rights. Girls are learning about their peers who are at risk of marriage or school dropout and intervening on their behalf. This is promising, as it indicates that through the provision of some key skills (e.g. public speaking) and knowledge, girls can make use of existing supportive structures, particularly taking advantage of the chiefs' central role in their communities.

Despite a few resource and structural constraints, these findings suggest that CSOs are also making significant inroads on issues related to child marriage. CSO participants in the midline expressed confidence in themselves, and success in working directly with the girls trained by ENGAGE.

In thinking about the findings from this midline evaluation, we present the following considerations and recommendations for ENGAGE and/or other NGOs working on child marriage, girls' education and girls' sexual and reproductive health in Phalombe and Thyolo Districts:

1. **Safety protocols must be set to protect girls:**

   ENGAGE girl leaders reported that at the beginning of the project they experienced some negative perceptions of the project as they were viewed as promoting prostitution and satanism. Participants reported that girl leaders experienced violence in the form of verbal and physical abuse from community members due to their work in ENGAGE. One CSO leader reported that some men in Thyolo have threatened to deliberately target ENGAGE girls to impregnate them. If this has not been reported before and otherwise addressed **there should be immediate steps taken to protect these girls**, possibly contacting local duty bearers such as chief and police in all ENGAGE implementation sites to ensure that protection protocols are developed. Even if this has already been done, programs should

train or retrain girls on any and all extant safety plans and reporting mechanisms in order to ensure the girls are ready if/when further safety concerns arise.

In addition, **meaningfully involving men and boys in socializing processes and in program activities** may be a good practice for creating a safer environment for girls to work in. Meaningfully involving men and boys requires additional time and insights to do well but may go a long way toward program safety and success. Finally, all programs working with girls should aim to **prepare girls on how to report violence**, within the program structure and beyond it, so that safety mechanism can be sustained beyond program the program lifecycle.

2. **Careful consideration should be given to addressing stigmatization of girls' sexual activity and pregnancy:**

Outside of the risk of violence against girls, one of the biggest challenges that NGOs working in this region face is the intense stigma against adolescent sexuality. This stigma appears to pervade girl leaders' lives regardless of what programs tell them and obfuscates messaging. Adolescent pregnancy was frequently cited as a driver of child marriage both during the baseline and the midline. Given that attitudes against child marriage and in favor of girls' education are already high, attitudes towards adolescent sexuality, and therefore adolescent access to contraception, is one of the key areas that programs can address to amplify their effects at the community level.

It was also clear that mixed messaging around adolescent's SRH is commonplace. Some ENGAGE girl leaders in Chiwalo reported that they learned relationships with boys were "bad" during the ENGAGE summer camp. Regardless of whether this is accurate or a misunderstanding of messaging, programs may want to **consider activities that destigmatize relationships and encourage girls to adopt safe sexual practices if they choose to have sex**. There may be a **role for the male champions groups which have formed and/or for the CSO leaders in Thyolo**. Some authority figures interviewed in this study (including traditional leaders, initiation counselors, teachers and SRH service providers) expressed an interest in supporting girls' access to contraceptives, which is another opportunity for future investments. Lastly, given the clear importance that stakeholders place in girls' education, it may help to **shape messaging around the importance of access to contraception to keeping girls in school**—something expressed by several girl leaders in this midline evaluation.

3. **Particular attention should be paid to stigmatization of unmarried girls' use of contraception:**

These findings showed that across the board, unmarried girls' access to contraception is stymied. From the interviews we see that although some girls are supportive of promoting contraceptives, others seem to prefer an "abstinence only" message. Mixed messaging from different NGOs may cause confusion and potentially cognitive dissonance around their own beliefs on the issue. While of course individual girls should make their own decisions around what is best in their own lives regarding whether to use contraception or abstinence to protect themselves against unwanted pregnancy, **programs can help girls promote a comprehensive range of approaches to avoiding pregnancy, including the advantages and disadvantages both of abstinence and of contraception.** This will allow other girls to make the decision which is best for them regarding avoiding early pregnancy.

4. **Careful consideration should be given to potential negative consequences of new by-laws:**

Communities in Phalombe and Thyolo are clearly making movements toward implementing practices and policies to keep girls in school and out of marriage, mostly before the age of 18. The creation of new by-laws—which can work at the TA or the district level—are a means of codifying these efforts. Part of ENGAGE's work has been to develop and support the creation of by-laws that are more favorable for girls.

However, these findings suggest that some of the newly developed by-laws—whether supported by ENGAGE or not—may have potential negative consequences for girls and their families, even if that is not their intent. For example, by-laws that require fines for girls found to be pregnant or married, or limit girls' mobility and freedom of expression, may end up further stigmatizing those girls and families that break the laws. It was not the intent of this evaluation to analyze the impacts of these by-laws, but in conducting and analyzing these interviews we began to wonder about the kinds of impacts that these by-laws might have on, for instance, a girl who must marry out of extreme poverty and then faces fines or further stigmatized in her community.

We recommend that programs that work with communities on by-laws pay attention to these potential consequences and track them. It will be important to follow up with those that deviate from the rules and understand the impacts of the by-laws on them, not only financially, but psychologically. If organizations can **work with local community members to ensure just and fair penalties for all community members when by-laws are broken**, that will help decrease stigmatisation of those who experience behaviors like child marriage. Lastly, organizations that help not only to **create new by-laws but also to**

enforce existing ones will greatly serve the community, as many beneficial laws are on the books but lack implementation.

Part 3: Strengths, limitations and implications of the midline evaluation context

There are several considerations that should be noted about the methods of and approaches to this midline evaluation.

The ENGAGE project is empowerment-based and iterative, indicating programmatic shifts to meet changing demands and needs of the communities it serves. As such, several aspects of the program were adapted while the midline research was being planned and thus some programmatic components were under-researched. This includes the male champions component of the intervention and the integration of girls in the CSO-only arm of the study. Interviews with more male champions, members of the DEC and non-ENGAGE girls could have elucidated more insights, particularly around other important aspects of the enabling environment and girls' training in ENGAGE.

It should be noted that while qualitative research provides rich insights into what individuals in these communities are thinking, there are inherent biases that can influence how individuals speak about things, especially around contentious issues like child marriage and adolescent pregnancy and the programs like ENGAGE brought in to addresses those issues. Due to programmatic and logistical reasons, ICRW hired staff from GENET to conduct the interviews. Though these staff members were not involved in ENGAGE, given the conflation in the community of ENGAGE and GENET, it is possible that participants were socially biased to speak well of ENGAGE's work or hold back negative opinions given their association of the research staff with GENET. Additionally, one of the greatest challenges in analyzing this qualitative midline data is that it is difficult, despite various methodological approaches to attenuate the issue, to tease out an individual's beliefs about what is happening, versus what they think *should* be happening. For example, when a participant says that child marriage has been completely eradicated, is this an "accurate" portrait, or is it more reflective of a desired future outcome or at worse, what she or he thinks the interviewer wants to hear? Careful attention to this aspect will inform the endline qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis.

The baseline and midline methods and samples are different from one another. The quantitative baseline data was conducted with adult decision-makers for adolescent girls while midline qualitative data collection took place with girls and other duty bearers, only some of whom are decision-makers for adolescent girls. In addition, while the baseline and midline evaluation results mostly complimented each other, there were notable differences, such as the contradiction between who makes decisions and child marriage. While it has been useful to put

baseline and midline results in conversation, it will be even more useful to look at relationships between the quantitative and qualitative data when they are collected at the same time, as will be the case at endline.

One last reminder is that some key informant interviews were from TA Nazombe, which is our comparison community for this study, and those participants are thus not exposed to ENGAGE activities, at least theoretically. It could be that there are meaningful differences in Nazombe communities compared to ENGAGE communities; however, these differences are not best sorted out in qualitative fieldwork. We hope to understand more when the ICRW team returns to the quantitative fieldwork at endline.

Contribution of these findings to impact evaluation analysis

With two rounds of data collection completed, the ICRW team is beginning to lay the foundation for the impact evaluation of whether (and how) the ENGAGE program is having an impact on key outcomes related to child marriage. As was true at baseline, midline findings suggest that social norms around child marriage are shifting in the communities where ENGAGE is taking place. There is not a reported expectation that girls should be married young; in addition, there are reports of both legal and social sanctions for those who do marry their daughters at a young age. However, child marriage is still occurring, both for prudential reasons (e.g. families cannot afford not to marry daughters and/or girls think their lives will be improved by marriage) and because the stigma against adolescent sexuality prevents adolescent girls from accessing contraceptives and thereby avoiding pregnancy. Per the findings from baseline, which showed poor understanding of local and national laws against child marriage, the study will continue to evaluate whether ENGAGE increased knowledge of these laws as well as attitudes towards adolescent contraceptive use.

More will be explored during endline phase of the evaluation.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix A: Baseline Methods and Findings

Sampling and recruitment strategies at baseline

Selection of study sites was a collaborative process that involved the donor, implementation partners, local and regional stakeholders, and the ICRW research team. There were several steps, starting with the selection of districts (Thyolo and Phalombe), followed by the selection of traditional authorities (TAs), which are the next geographic unit below the district and then group village heads (GVHs), villages, households and individuals.

The two districts selected for ENGAGE were chosen due to high prevalence of child marriage, proximity to Blantyre (where GENET is based), feasibility of implementation in these districts and lack of other interventions on similar issues for young people. Within each district, there are between seven and 15 TAs. Based on the number of girls needed to be reached in each district, and given the TA population estimates, the team estimated that two TAs was sufficient in each district for implementation and evaluation targets.

To reduce bias, the process of selecting TAs was as random as possible. First, ENGAGE team met with the District Executive Committee (DEC) to confirm the number of existing TAs in each district (as geographic boundaries are prone to change) and certain characteristics that may make certain TAs less amenable to intervention and research. With the DEC, the research and implementation team created criteria on which to judge whether a TA was eligible for inclusion in ENGAGE. The main purpose was to have a list of eligible TAs that were similar in characteristics. The list of criteria included wealth, ethnicity, prevalence of child marriage, etc. Once the final list of eligible TAs was proposed within a district, the DEC randomly selected two TAs and assigned them an "arm" of the evaluation.

At baseline, further randomization was conducted at the village and individual levels to identify adult decision-makers of adolescent girls for inclusion in the baseline survey.

Ethical review and approval

ICRW received IRB approval from ICRW's internal IRB and Malawi's National Commission for Science and Technology at baseline. At midline, both IRBs reviewed and approved modifications to the tools and recruitment strategies based on baseline findings and feedback from the implementation team.

Baseline evaluation findings

In total, 1,492 adults who identified as decision makers for adolescent girls completed the quantitative baseline questionnaire. The sample included equal numbers of decision-makers from all four TAs and included parents, aunts, uncles and grandparents, many of whom were teachers and community leaders.

Key findings from the baseline survey include:

- Although adult decision-makers, especially women, had low knowledge of laws about marriage, most expressed strong opposition to child marriage, even in cases where girls were unable to afford school fees or became pregnant. It appears that in the study communities, norms related to child marriage may have already shifted. Adult decision-makers appeared highly sensitized to the issue of child marriage, more so than was anticipated at the start of the project.
- Most adult decision-makers report that mothers and girls themselves were final decision-makers when it came to when and whom to marry.
- Adult decision-makers universally agreed that girls had a right to be educated and that there was value to a girl being educated. Mothers and fathers were most often identified as the people making the final decisions related to girls' school enrollment.
- Adult decision-makers were less accepting of unmarried girls having access to sexual and reproductive health services, with around 80 percent of respondents believing this made young girls promiscuous.

Appendix B: Organizations providing services for girls

- **Sexual and Reproductive Health:** Community Health Centers, Clinics (Changata and Nazombe), Health Surveillance Assistants, school (one girl mentioned, due to cervical cancer screening).
- **School fees:** CAMFED (mentioned a lot), UNICEF, Mchima Trust, Amasi, MPs.
- **Educational Support:** EXGAME, MESIP, CAMFED, Molele, Masambanjati Community Day Secondary School.
- **Social Welfare/Child Protection:** Police, Child Protection Officers, Community Police Forum, Mother's Groups, VDC.
- In addition to these groups, participants also frequently named GENET as an organization provided services for girls. Community members also occasionally CSO Leader organizations, particularly CRECCOM, as service providers.