



**JULY, 2021**

Perceived community changes from the ENGAGE project (2017–2020) in Southern Malawi: Findings from qualitative endline research

## Abstract

The Enabling Girls to Advance Gender Equity (ENGAGE) program was implemented in Southern Malawi from 2017 to 2020. The main goal of the program was to empower girl leaders and foster civil society organizations (CSOs) to advocate for and address issues related to child marriage, gender inequality, sexual and reproductive health (SRH), and girls' education. This report covers the results of the endline qualitative research, which focused on understanding program participants and community members' perspectives about the ENGAGE program and the changes in their communities related to child marriage, among other topics. In total, we conducted interviews with 20 girl leaders, 10 CSO leaders, and 16 community stakeholders in four traditional authorities in Thyolo and Phalombe Districts. Findings suggest that perceptions of the program were positive, and participants noted significant changes in their communities, especially a reduction in child marriages; increases in girls' entry, attendance, and retention in school; and increases in accessing SRH services. Although a few challenges were noted, and attribution of the program on outcomes is not guaranteed, data suggest that the program successfully delivered its anticipated goals.

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank our research team, including Fatima Kenias, Linda Msowoya, Tadala Vanessa Boti, Elizabeth Waya, Faith Adams Mapemba, and led by Faith Phiri. Without their hard work and dedication, this report would not be possible. We are also grateful to the program participants—including girl and CSO leaders—who took time to share their experiences with us about the program and the state of child marriage in their communities.

This report is in honor of our colleague Elizabeth Mazuwa Waya (fondly known as Lizzie), a proud member of the GENET team, who tragically passed away in January 2021. She worked with us on the ENGAGE project as a research team member and helped bring to life the stories and experiences of ENGAGE participants, including young girls, community members, and other stakeholders. We are grateful for her courage and dedication to serving young girls in Malawi.

### Authors:

Laura Hinson, PhD, MPH (International Center for Research on Women)

Emily Schaub, MA (International Center for Research on Women)

Faith Phiri, MPH (Girls Empowerment Network of Malawi – GENET)

## Executive Summary

- The ENGAGE project was implemented from 2016 through 2020 in Southern Malawi. The program aimed to empower girls to be the agents of change in their own communities and create an enabling environment around empowered girls by working with civil society organization (CSO) leaders. The main goal of the project was to reduce child marriage in the community.
- The evaluation of ENGAGE utilized a four-arm trial design. This report focuses on results from the endline qualitative data, including interviews with girl participants, CSO leaders, and other community stakeholders like chiefs.
- Overall, research participants believed the program was well-received in intervention communities. The strategies of engaging girls and building capacities of local organizations were seen as the program's greatest strengths and the most promising for its sustainability and ability to achieve lasting, meaningful change.
- ENGAGE participants were highly optimistic about the program's impact. Specifically, most participants believed that because of the program, child marriages had significantly decreased.
- Other impacts included: improved school attendance and greater importance placed on education; reduction in harmful traditional practices such as participation in forced sexual initiation ceremonies; and enhanced acceptance by community members of girls' use of contraception.
- Girls who participated in the program reported not only gains in communication and public speaking skills, but increased self-esteem and confidence in their ability to speak on issues related to their own rights.
- The COVID-19 pandemic arrived toward the end of program implementation but appears to have disrupted some of ENGAGE's work in the community, specifically through restrictions and shutdowns that kept girls out of school and back into sexual activity and early marriages.
- Additional findings from the quantitative endline (forthcoming: end of 2021) will further contextualize the program's impact.

## Overview

In Malawi, 42 percent of girls and seven percent of boys are married before the age of 18, some of the highest rates in the world for both genders.<sup>1</sup> Particularly in Southern Malawi, harmful traditional practices including *kusasa fumbi*, or forced sexual initiation, exacerbate the health, education, social, and economic impacts of early marriage. Despite recent moves by the government of Malawi to end child marriage, including a 2015 law banning marriage before the age of 18 without parental consent and a 2017 amendment to remove the parental consent loophole,<sup>2</sup> the extent of local enforcement and community

acceptance of the law has remained unclear.

In 2016, Rise Up of the Public Health Institute (PHI), the Girls Empowerment Network of Malawi (GENET), ETR's Youth Tech Health (YTH) Initiative, Youth Net and Counseling (YONECO), and the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW)—with funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation—launched the Enabling Girls to Advance Gender Equity (ENGAGE) program. ENGAGE trained girls in leadership, advocacy, and local and national laws and policies and empowered leaders of civil society organizations (CSOs) to create and implement local bylaws prohibiting harmful practices within their districts. The program aimed to reduce acceptance of child marriage and other harmful practices, delay marriage and childbearing, encourage and enable girls to stay in school, and increase access to family planning information and services.

## ENGAGE INTERVENTION OVERVIEW

ENGAGE was implemented over three years (from 2018 to 2020) in two districts in Southern Malawi to empower girls and CSO leaders to influence traditional, community, and religious authority figures and other duty-bearers to shift norms related to child marriage and increase gender equality. The goals of the intervention were to prompt an eventual decline in rates of child marriage and related harmful practices, improving girls' access to education and sexual and reproductive health (SRH). ENGAGE conducted the following interventions:

1. **Training and peer-based clubs for adolescent girls.**

GENET worked with 773 girl leaders ages 15-17 to take on a greater role in decisions pertaining to education, health, and autonomy. ENGAGE trained and worked with two cohorts of adolescent girls (approximately 400 girls per cohort), aiming to build advocacy, leadership, and public speaking skills. These girls established clubs with girls ages 10-18 to discuss child marriage and related issues in their own communities and mobilize them to speak out for their rights with authority figures. Girls also engaged with community members through awareness campaigns and other efforts addressing areas of focus for ENGAGE, such as child marriage.

2. **Training and engaging local CSO leaders.**

Rise Up trained 36 leaders from local CSOs (18 leaders per cohort) and provided them with technical support and an opportunity for financial support to implement eight advocacy projects. These leaders and the communities engaged with their advocacy projects continue to engage stakeholders, hold community leaders accountable to local bylaws, and conduct other activities to create and maintain an enabling environment to end child marriage.

3. **SMS/Radio campaign.**

Together, YTH and YONECO implemented 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.

## EVALUATION OVERVIEW

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

At baseline, four traditional authorities (TA)<sup>3</sup> were randomly assigned to one of four evaluation arms:

- *Empowering Girls Only* (Arm 1 – TA Chiwalo, Phalombe District)
- *Building CSO Capacity Only* (Arm 2 – TA Mchiramwera, Thyolo District)
- *Empowering Girls + Building CSO Capacity* (Arm 3 – TA Changata, Thyolo District)
- *Comparison* (Arm 4 – TA Nazombe, Phalombe District)

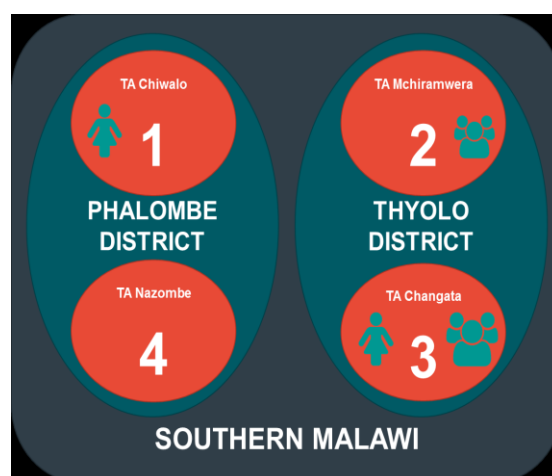


Figure 1: ENGAGE Study Arms

This design allows for comparison of the effectiveness of each intervention individually and as a combined set. The team hypothesized that the combination of CSO and girls' interventions would positively change community attitudes, norms, and behaviors around child marriage to a greater extent than either intervention individually.

A quantitative household survey was conducted at baseline, between June and July 2017, with adult decision-makers of adolescent girls, after which implementation began (report available [here](#)). At midline in November 2018, ICRW, with data collection support from GENET, held qualitative in-depth interviews (IDI) with girls and CSOs involved in ENGAGE, key informant interviews (KII) with relevant stakeholders in both comparison and

intervention districts, and focus group discussions with various reference groups of girls at risk of child marriage (report available [here](#)).

Both qualitative and quantitative endline data collection activities were expected to take place in March 2020. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and related travel restrictions, evaluation activities were postponed. As the situation continued and worsened, ICRW decided to conduct qualitative interviews over the phone in November 2020. An endline household survey is planned to take place later in 2021, to be conducted in person. This report relies on qualitative data at endline. An additional report will be released once quantitative data are collected and analyzed.

## Qualitative Endline Objectives and Methods

The qualitative endline IDIs with girls and CSO leaders and KIIs aimed to shed light on the changes that had occurred in ENGAGE target communities since baseline; assess the status of norms and practices around child marriage, sexual initiation, education, SRH services, and adolescent pregnancy; and evaluate the impact of ENGAGE activities on those norms, including the extent to which ENGAGE is responsible for perceived changes in the community.

In November 2020, the ICRW team and staff members from GENET conducted 46 interviews over the phone, including 20 IDIs with girls, 10 with CSO leaders and 16 KIIs. A breakdown of participant types is shown in **Table 1**.

**Table 1: Endline Participants**

Participant Type	Location	Number
IDI with girl leaders in ENGAGE (at least 15 years old)	Chiwalo (Arm 1)	10
	Changata (Arm 3)	10
CSO leaders who received funding from ENGAGE	Mchiramwera (Arm 2)	5
	Changata (Arm 3)	5
KIIs with local stakeholders	Chiwalo (Arm 1)	4
	Mchiramwera (Arm 2)	4
	Changata (Arm 3)	4
	Nazombe (Arm 4)	4

## SELECTION AND RECRUITMENT OF STUDY PARTICIPANTS

### Girl leaders

When possible, the same girls who had participated at midline were interviewed again at endline. At midline, the ENGAGE implementation team had called meetings with girl leaders in each of 10 selected study sites—five sites per district where the girls' intervention was taking place. A member of the research team explained the purpose of the study and asked if any girl leaders were interested in participating. The team then randomly selected two interested girls in each site and, after obtaining parental consent (girls interviewed at midline were by design all under the age of 18) and girls' assent, conducted the in-person interview.

At endline, the study team contacted the girls who had participated at midline, using the phone numbers provided. The team asked whether the girl was interested in participating again. Girls who were by endline over the age of 18 gave consent and were interviewed over the phone. If girls were still under 18, they provided a phone number for a parent. The team then called the parent and obtained parental consent before obtaining girls' assent and conducting the interview, again over the phone.

At endline, eight girls who had participated at midline could not be reached or declined to participate again. These girls were replaced with the second cohort of trained girls, since they were under-represented at midline.

### CSO Leaders

ICRW received a list of CSO leaders funded by ENGAGE. The list was organized by focus area of CSO initiative (e.g., SRH services, initiation camp curricula, child protection) and CSO leaders were selected for participation such that a variety of focus areas was represented in both locations. In cases where more than one CSO leader in a location was focused on one topic, one leader was randomly selected. CSO leaders selected for participation were contacted by the research team over the phone. The interviewer provided information about the study and obtained informed consent before beginning the interview.

### Key Stakeholders

The GENET research team purposively selected adult participants for the KIIs based on the individual's position in the community and perceived expertise on ENGAGE issues. GENET and Rise Up staff provided insight to identify potential stakeholders in intervention communities (Arms 1-3) and the research team engaged local leaders to identify interviewees in the comparison community (Arm 4). The research team contacted selected individuals by phone to obtain informed consent and conduct the interview.

## DATA COLLECTION

A team of GENET staff members not involved in ENGAGE programming was contracted by ICRW to conduct the qualitative data collection activities at both midline and endline. ICRW led a virtual, five-day data collection training facilitated by a GENET data collection supervisor. The training focused on ethical research with human subjects, interview techniques with a focus on phone-based data collection, and study procedures and tools, including a thorough review of all recruitment and consent scripts and interview guides. Following this training, five data collectors conducted the 46 interviews over the phone. Interviews were audio-recorded using built-in recording devices on data collectors' phones or external recorders.

## DATA PREPARATION AND ANALYSIS

Once data collection was complete, the team transcribed each interview from the recording, translated them verbatim into English, and submitted the translated transcripts to ICRW, where the research team reviewed them for clarity and quality. Transcripts were imported into NVivo 11 and coded by a team of ICRW researchers. Codes were developed based on the guides and key objectives of the qualitative research—namely, changes in the community and impacts of ENGAGE, particularly around child marriage, education, and SRH norms. Intercoder reliability was conducted on approximately 15 percent of transcripts of each type. Once sufficient agreement between coders was reached, the remainder of the transcripts were coded. Code reports were reviewed by the research team, who then developed code summaries for each report. Finally, the research team reviewed all code summaries to identify common themes.

## Results

As anticipated, we conducted 46 interviews at endline. The girl leaders we interviewed ranged in age from 16 to 22 years old and in level of education from Standard 7 to Form 4 (equivalent to 7<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> grade under the U.S. system). Three girls had at least one child and one of these was also married; all three of these participants resided in Chiwalo. Girls in Chiwalo were also somewhat older than girls in Changata and had completed a lower level of education.



**Table 2: Demographic Characteristics of Interview Participants, Girl Leaders**

	<i>Number of Participants, Changata (N=10)</i>	<i>Number of Participants, Chiwalo (N=10)</i>
<b>Age</b>		
16 – 17	2	2
18 – 19	8	4
20 – 22	0	4
<b>Highest level of school completed</b>		
Standard 7 or Standard 8	0	3
Form 1 or Form 2	2	4
Form 3 or Form 4	8	3
<b>Currently enrolled in school</b>		
Yes	9	5
No	1	5

We also interviewed 10 CSO leaders—five each in Changata and Mchiramwera—including three women and seven men, ranging in age from 25 to 52 years. Average age of respondents was 37 years old. Among the 16 key informants we interviewed, the age range was from 23 to 68 years. Five were women and 11 were men. This group included youth champions, Area Development Committee and Group Village Headmen<sup>4</sup> representatives, teachers and other school officials, chiefs, and initiation counsellors. Thematic focuses of the IDIs with CSO leaders and the KIIs included child marriage, education, gender-based violence, school readmission policies, and initiation camps.

We organize results into two main sections. In the first, we describe participants’ experience with and as part of the ENGAGE program, and in the second we discuss key focal areas that the ENGAGE program aimed to influence, specifically (1) child marriage; (2) education; (3) sexual and reproductive health; (4) initiation camps; and (5) other changes participants described that we did not specifically inquire on.

Lastly, we have three stand-alone sections on (1) Nazombe (Arm 4, the comparison community, where ENGAGE was not active); (2) the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on ENGAGE communities; and (3) participants’ experience with the SMS and radio activities conducted by ENGAGE, which were not formally included in this evaluation.

## **SECTION 1: ENGAGE PROGRAMMING IN PRACTICE**

### **Goals of ENGAGE**

All research participants from endline data collection (except those from Nazombe, as expected) knew of ENGAGE and were able to articulate its purposes. When articulating the objective of ENGAGE, participants focused on outcome-specific aspects like ending child

marriage, keeping girls in school, reducing violence and ending initiation camps. In addition, a few girls and CSO participants mentioned that the program aimed to empower girls and build their skills.

“The ENGAGE Program mainly aims to promote girls’ education and end some cultural practices and norms that take place in the communities. It also aimed at ending child marriages and bringing back to school the girls withdrawn from marriages.” (Girl, age 22, Chiwalo)

According to the girl participants, the main activities that girls conducted as part of the program included holding girls’ clubs, meeting with chiefs, going door to door to ‘break up’ child marriages, working with girls who dropped out of schools, and conducting community sensitization meetings. This was in addition to the training they received at the start of the intervention, where they were taught skills like public speaking and knowledge related to gender equity, dangers of early marriage and pregnancy, consequences of having a boyfriend, and the importance of school. In turn, girl participants would spread these messages to other girls in their community—either through the clubs or in other ways like community outreach.

ENGAGE strategies implemented by CSO leaders who were included in our study focused on specific advocacy efforts, such as working on initiation camp curricula and bylaws related to school dropouts. In the communities they worked in, CSO leaders conducted meetings with chiefs, created and/or participated in various community groups such as mothers’ groups, delivered messages related to girls such as child rights, held meetings with district officials, engaged duty bearers such as initiation camp leaders, worked alongside youth, and helped to revise and develop new community bylaws.

### **Perceptions of ENGAGE**

Asked to reflect on their feelings about the ENGAGE program and their participation in it, responses from girls and CSO leaders were overwhelmingly positive. Girls enjoyed the clubs and ENGAGE activities, such as drama, poetry, and music. They recognized the value of the messaging through ENGAGE and the skills the program imparted.

“I like the ENGAGE program because their lessons touched my heart, and without it I wouldn’t have been the person I am... Every time they [ENGAGE leaders] come I run to attend the meetings and get the chance to ask them how to improve my education and they answer accordingly.” (Girl, age 19, Chiwalo)

CSO leaders were also pleased with their involvement in the program, expressing gratitude not only for the funding they received but also for the skills they developed as a direct result of ENGAGE programming, including advocacy and proposal-writing skills to support their ongoing work in the areas of child marriage prevention, girls' education, and girls' empowerment, among others.

“Other partners... just give [funding] without the capacity [building] so ENGAGE started with the capacity and then... give to partners they think are capable to deliver so that's the uniqueness of ENGAGE and I really liked it.” (CSO Leader, Mchiramwera)

Both girls and CSO leaders were particularly pleased with the specific strategies that ENGAGE employed. CSO leaders in Changata and Mchiramwera focused on two key aspects of ENGAGE: girls as changemakers and the engagement of various local partners. Both were considered critical to programmatic efficacy and sustainability and were viewed as highlights of ENGAGE.

“What I liked most about my taking part in the ENGAGE program is how the project was focused on the girl child, how to protect her, how to promote her education.” (CSO Leader, Changata)

“ENGAGE... incorporated everyone. They focused at the girl on her own and how they can help her; they focused on small civil society organizations and what skills they would be equipped with and how they would help; they also focus on our colleagues, the journalists and what role they would play to end child marriages.” (CSO Leader, Mchiramwera)

While ENGAGE participants were universally pleased with ENGAGE programming, participants' perceptions of how others in the community viewed the program and its messaging were more mixed. Many participants noted that there had been at least some resistance to ENGAGE and its activities, especially among individuals who have traditionally benefited from the status quo, including initiation camp leaders, chiefs who received gifts from parents of initiated girls, and parents whose underage daughters were married for financial reasons. These individuals were primed to resist any change to the structures and norms from which they were benefitting.

“Initially they did not welcome the work properly, mostly the initiation counselors because economically they depended on the programs like that one, so we were like a threat because we were advocating for the need to sit down and improve how their program is supposed to be done.” (CSO Leader, Changata)

“Sometimes parents are the reason why girls get married at an early age with the intention of benefitting ‘jumbo’ [gifts such as groceries]. So, when we say that this marriage should end, they say that the son-in-law has money, he helps us, so who are you to end the marriage?” (Girl, age 18, Changata)

In addition, respondents noted some misconceptions of ENGAGE that, until corrected, contributed to reservations from the communities about the program. One girl said that people thought the program was related to Satan, but more commonly people appeared to believe that the program would teach or promote prostitution. This was especially true in Chiwalo.

“Some would say a lot of negative things when they see GENET staff. Things like they have brought family planning methods, they are teaching our children prostitution.” (Girl, age 20, Chiwalo)

On the other hand, those community members who were closely connected with ENGAGE, such as friends and parents of girl leaders, did not seem to hold these same concerns and, in fact, were welcoming of ENGAGE and pleased with the program, much as program participants themselves were.

“They [my parents] welcomed the program, my dad also wants such things and as soon as he’d hear that your child has gone to [the ENGAGE camp] in Phalombe he was very excited and he encouraged me, saying, ‘My daughter, you should heed such an organization. You should take part in

each and every thing,' because my father wants his child to learn.” (Girl, age 16, Chiwalo)

Moreover, even among respondents who described some hesitancy on the part of community members around ENGAGE reported that for the most part, negative perceptions diminished over the lifetime of the program. Once people understood the goals of ENGAGE, most people were pleased with it.

“When the program was just new some people were not happy because they did not know the real reason for the existence of this program, but when they got to know what the program was all about, they were happy and receptive.” (Girl, age 18, Changata)

### **Challenges with ENGAGE programming**

While for the most part respondents praised ENGAGE, a few challenges were noted, including logistical issues, programming weaknesses and the results of the community resistance described above. CSO leaders and key stakeholders discussed logistical concerns, notably transportation issues and limited funding. Because of transportation challenges, some areas of the TAs were difficult to reach. Funding, too, limited the reach of the program, and several respondents urged future program implementers to consider expanding to other areas.

“Because of inadequate funding by ENGAGE, it restricted us from reaching other areas because of insufficient funds. So that was... a problem.” (CSO Leader, Mchiramwera)

Some respondents also mentioned the lack of targeted programming for certain groups, including male champions and girls of other ages. Programming for these groups, some said, might have increased the program's reach and impacts.

“It's only male champions that did not perform in an effective way. After asking facilitation team about training us, they simply say we are run out of time to continue with you because this is the end of the program.” (Community leader, Changata)

Although the program succeeded in passing bylaws related to marriage, increasing child marriage reporting, and ending girls' marriages, some respondents described a lack of enforcement and of follow-up on girls whose marriages were ended. They suggested this was a shortcoming of ENGAGE programming and could have implications for sustained impact. Similarly, while girls received messaging around the importance of education, financial barriers to schooling remained and poverty coupled with high cost of school continued to prevent girls from seeking educational opportunities.

“What worried me most is that we did not have anything to support children that had dropped out of school with school materials so that they can return to school... We just encouraged them that's all.” (Girl, age 18, Chiwalo)

The greatest challenge for girls, however, was community resistance, especially from parents of girls they visited to counsel against marriage. We learned over the course of implementation, through reports from girls, regular ongoing monitoring, and our midline interviews, that some ENGAGE girls had received verbal and even physical abuse from these parents who shouted at them and chased them away. In the most extreme scenarios, girls reported being beaten or chased by dogs. Fortunately, by the time endline interviews were conducted, these attacks appeared to have stopped. Girls appeared to have successfully involved chiefs, child protection workers, and other adults familiar with the ENGAGE program to better sensitize the community to the program and to interfere to prevent violence against girl leaders. While most girls reported having heard about these attacks in the past, in general they said that they were no longer taking place.

### **Personal experience with the program**

Both CSO leaders and girl participants described the ways in which they personally benefited from the ENGAGE program. CSO leaders described tangible, relevant skills they gained from the ENGAGE partnership and training they received through ENGAGE, which helped them to increase the impact of their ENGAGE-specific activities and improve their ability to work outside of ENGAGE. Key skills mentioned include advocacy, networking, resource mobilization and proposal development, reporting and project management, and public speaking.

CSO leaders also described real results of this capacity development. Advocacy, networking, and public speaking skills allowed them to build and maintain partnerships and collaborate with other organizations, which they perceived led to a greater program impact. Many reported that improved proposal writing skills would generate more funding, and some reported that they already had. Other CSO leaders described appointment to

leadership roles and development of partnerships that they saw as a direct result of engagement with Rise Up and ENGAGE.

“Growing up in the rural community, it has been my desire to contribute to the socioeconomic issues affecting my community. But one of the things that I have been lacking is the skills and knowledge. So, participating in this program has given me a lot of knowledge and my approaching issues are quite different.” (CSO Leader, Changata)

“[ENGAGE supported us by] empowering us not giving as wealth or handouts... They organize and conduct a meeting where we are asked how we are working, and they would also explain how they are working. This capacitated us with skills, and we would be aware of what we had to do. So, we would say that they empowered us by giving us skills.” (Community leader, Chiwalo)

Girls reported that ENGAGE built their capacities to lead groups and speak out, as well as their sense that girls should speak out and participate in public decision-making. Girls said that ENGAGE training built their self-esteem and motivated them to do well in school.

“I was among those who used to think if you do standard 1 up to standard 8 that’s enough you are supposed to get married, but when ENGAGE came to teach us, I changed my mind that’s why now am into school.” (Girl, age 16, Chiwalo)

“Initially, I didn’t have public speaking skills but because of the training I became confident such that am now able to stand before a group of people and articulate issues and be understood.” (Girl, age 22, Chiwalo)

## SECTION 2: PERCEIVED CHANGES IN NORMS AND PRACTICES

### Child marriage

All but a few participants stated that child marriages had reduced in their communities since ENGAGE started, with some emphatically exclaiming that child marriage had dramatically reduced because of the program.

“My opinions about this change that girls are no longer getting married [and I] am very happy. Because, in the past before coming in of this program, a lot of girls were losing their lives due to maternal deaths. When they got pregnant while they are young, they lose their lives in labor ward. So the coming in of this program brought a lot of changes in terms of early marriages and am very happy, in fact am always happy every day.” (Girl, age 18, Changata)

A few were more conservative in their estimates, saying that while there had been some decrease in the behavior, more work still needed to be done to eradicate it complete.

“What I expected to change was child marriage but little by little it’s changing. But the problem is, if we find out that there is a child marriage, [it is that] some of them [young lovers] are running away together. But slowly, because we haven't finished working, we will do our best and things will definitely change.” (Girl, age 19, Chiwalo)

When asked about their personal feelings and the perceptions of others’ feelings about the change, participants noted that everyone was “happy.” This included parents, chiefs, teachers, and grandparents who were perceived to be grateful that child marriage appeared to be reducing in their communities. Most participants discussed initial skepticism that the program would be successful but noted the personal transformation of themselves and their communities in terms of understanding the negative impacts of child marriage, and the benefits of education.

A critical factor in making change was the involvement of chiefs. They were seen as essential gatekeepers—where chiefs were supportive, and especially where bylaws were changed, the rates of child marriage decreased.



“My dear there is change [in child marriage], especially here at Chiwalo. We don’t have such things happening. Maybe just one as I already explained that even chiefs are at the forefront making sure such things are not happening. We have women chiefs who are also working with female parents while male chiefs are working with fathers and others. There is a lot happening here; ENGAGE has really done a great job and we wish if they could have come earlier.” (Community leader, Chiwalo)

When asked if the reasons girls marry young have changed since ENGAGE came into the communities, girl participants said yes and listed myriad examples as to why. Girls and adult participants alike mentioned that parents were now “afraid” to marry young girls. Before, girls married young because their parents or uncles (and sometimes initiation counselors) forced them to. However, because parents in these communities had become afraid of punishment and sanctions imposed by the chiefs, few marriages were initiated by family members. Instead, girls themselves were the reason that marriages among young girls still happened—they see their friends marrying and they want to experience it themselves; or, they are not doing well in school and feel they have better life prospects in the context of marriage.

“Previously, parents used to make the decision for their child to get married. But now, courtesy of this program, many parents have come to realize that they should not make the decision on behalf of their children; rather, one has to make that decision on her own. If any parent is found forcing their child into marriage, they are reported to mother groups or social welfare who take them to task and this has restrained many parents since they are afraid to face the law.” (Girl, age 18, Changata)

In addition, ENGAGE participants believe that changes to bylaws, sanctions, and enforcement structures in their communities—along with the community’s recognition of these protective mechanisms—lessened adults’ ability and desire to facilitate marriages. In addition, extensive socialization activities by ENGAGE participants educated community members about the reporting structures, bylaws and sanctions surrounding the behavior.

“These bylaws are being strengthened through the chiefs. For example, if a girl is being forced to marriage, we report that to the chief and he invites

the parents for a discussion to find out why they are doing that until the issue is sorted out... At first there were some misunderstandings between parents and the chief. Parents claimed that they have rights to make any decision for their children; however, the chief made them pay fine for their actions towards their children and later parents realized that it was out of ignorance that they were doing that. Now they have changed and are able to appreciate the good work that ENGAGE program has done in the area.” (Girl, age 19, Chiwalo)

Specific changes to bylaws included refining them to articulate appropriate ages for marriage, specifying that children do not engage in relationships at tender ages, updating fines for breaking rules with clear specifications for who pays the fine. Importantly, CSO leader participants mentioned they facilitated the creation of community action groups responsible for enforcing the laws, which deterred child marriages.

“Right now, they [bylaws related to child marriage] are being enforced because we have enforcement committees. These are community action groups, the ones who are doing the actual enforcement. Previously, we had bylaws which had no enforcement committees. It’s the community that should be doing the enforcement, so nowadays there is transparency and accountability, and everyone knows what is supposed to happen when such things happen people know the procedures they are supposed to do.” (CSO Leader, Mchiramwera)

Other reasons that girl participants attributed to recent reductions in child marriages included:

- A change in mindset about school: girls now understand the importance of education and hard work, including the prospect of working or owning a small business in the community.
- A clearer understanding of the consequences of marriage: girls better understand that marriage has downsides, including intimate partner violence, and can also lead to additional poverty.
- Girls have been taught not to have boyfriends, and to focus on school—as such, there are fewer relationships, and thus fewer pregnancies.

- Because of the work done in the community related to re-admittance into school, girls who are pregnant now have a pathway back to the classroom rather than into marriage.
- Girls' self-esteem and self-efficacy improved, which gave them confidence to say no to relationships but also not succumb to peer pressure and marriage.
- The community knows how to take care of orphans now, rather than marrying them off.

A few girls noted that child marriage had not changed much in their communities.

“In the past, people did the same getting married at a young age and when the program started, we encouraged girls to avoid marriage. But they didn't listen, they continue to marry and also getting pregnant like they used to do.” (Girl, age 21, Chiwalo)

One reason participants gave for child marriages persisting despite ENGAGE's progress was poverty—specifically, an inability to pay for school fees and materials. However, several girls mentioned that community members now know that poverty is not a “good enough” reason for a girl to marry. Another reason given was a lack of awareness and enforcement of the new bylaws.

## Education

Most respondents reported that enrollment and completion of secondary school among girls in their communities was high and had improved dramatically since the start of ENGAGE. There was a widespread understanding that educating girls is important for the community as a whole and should be prioritized in girls' lives. Girls themselves described feeling motivated to perform well in school and draw linkages between education, employment, and independence.

The improvements in girls' educational attainment were attributed to meetings and other outreach activities that enlightened community members and girls themselves to the benefits of girls' education. These community events changed people's mindsets related to the importance of girls' education.

“Most girls are completing school successfully without any problems... Back in the day as soon as a girl got to Standard 6, that was it. It was considered that she had acquired enough from school and typically would get

pregnant.” (Girl, age 16, Changata)

“More girls are finishing their education. More are passing with good grades in class, because in the past they were looking down on themselves. They had low self esteem, boys were doing better than them but now after GENET came, they were empowered and now they are working harder than boys.” (Girl, age 20, Chiwalo)

In addition to attitudinal shifts, some respondents described new laws related to girls’ education, including laws to protect girls who become pregnant and allow them to return to school, as well as fines against parents whose daughters are found not to be in school. Some respondents noted that parents were especially fearful of these fines, which pushed them to keep their daughters in school when they otherwise may not have.

“Nowadays, girls that become pregnant have powers to go to the school headmaster to fill forms for place reservation. These forms are the forms that were stated in re-admission policy so that they are able to go back to school after delivery.” (CSO Leader, Mchiramwera)

The community was largely receptive to these changes. Outreach from ENGAGE had primed community members to realize the importance of girls’ education, so that the increases in educational attainment are viewed in a positive light. Especially among some of the chiefs who participated in the study, there was a sense that the low education completion rate of girls was “embarrassing” to the community, so they take pride in the changes they see.

“I feel so proud when I see so many children pursuing their education.”  
(Community leader, Mchiramwera)

Despite the strides made with respect to attitudes toward girls’ education, barriers remained. One girl in Chiwalo described ongoing prejudice against older girls in school, which may affect their likelihood of staying in school and completing their education. While meaningful changes were described in all intervention communities, such lingering attitudes against girls’ education appeared more prevalent in Chiwalo than in Changata or Mchiramwera, suggesting that CSO leader engagement may be critical for attitude change.

"Some parents are forcing their children to get married while young and about school they discourage them that they are older and not fit for the class they are in." (Girl, age 19, Chiwalo)

Other respondents mentioned that poverty still impeded girls' access to education: despite a more positive mindset, many girls still lacked the financial resources to attend school.

"Many children are suffering because they come from very poor families and I would have loved if things changed in such a way that each child selected to go to community secondary school should be guaranteed of assistance. It would have done us a lot of good. Because these children are doing well in primary school but as soon as they get to Form 1 due to difficulties in accessing fees, they have problems." (Community leader, Changata)

### **Sexual and reproductive health and rights**

Most participants indicated that there had been changes in SRHR outcomes for girls since ENGAGE began in their communities. One persistent narrative as to how the ENGAGE program improved SRHR was through teaching girls to avoid being in boy-girl relationships and abstaining from sex. Much of that was teaching about the consequences of sex and early pregnancy, such as fistula, as well as focusing on the importance of education and schooling. Other actions, such as the implementation and/or enforcement of bylaws that restrict girls' mobility at night, appear to have reinforced this message that girls should avoid relationships.

"The issue of sexual activities has changed because the village headman selected police unit which patrol night hours. Whenever they found a girl and a boy were given powers to seize them and hand them over to the chief." (Girl, age 18, Changata)

While some girl participants talked about girls being "afraid" of being in relationships, others described it as girls now having the agency to avoid them.

"A lot of things have changed. Even boys are afraid nowadays to approach a

girl since we trained them how to respond and that nobody can force them to do what they are not willing to do.” (Girl, age 19, Changata)

Improvements on SRHR-related aspects also occurred through updates to the initiation camp curriculum, and the sexual practices historically encouraged by them. Without requirements such as forced sexual initiation (which was eliminated in many communities during the time of ENGAGE programming), according to participants, girls were not engaging in sexual relationships to the extent that they were before.

In addition to avoiding sexual relationships, others said that girls now know where to get services and contraception, and because of ENGAGE, the community better accepts that girls can use contraception methods without being perceived as prostitutes. Participants reported that people in the community now believe that these methods allow girls to stay in school and empower them, rather than make them promiscuous.

“But now they have realized that girls can use family planning for their own health and to continue their education.” (Girl, age 18, Changata)

“There is a change because with the advent of ENGAGE, girls have had so much access to information and the girls are encouraged to access sexual reproductive health care, a thing which never used to happen in the past because it was considered as a taboo to see girls accessing family planning methods. But now our young girls can access family planning services because they are being encouraged by ENGAGE to go and access those at the hospital.” (KII, Social Welfare Worker, Mchiramwera)

Although appearing mutually exclusive, participants articulated that many community members simultaneously support girls’ sexual abstinence and accept contraceptive use; it is best to abstain but in the case that you cannot, use of contraception is encouraged.

“In cases where a girl is not able to abstain, she wants to have sex with a boy from time to time, the parents are able to escort her to the hospital to have her access family planning methods with the intention that she should get educated.” (Girl, age 18, Changata)

Several participants noted that girls were now accessing services, even with adult encouragement. A few participants even noted a reduction in teen pregnancies.

“People’s minds have changed. In the past people were telling girls that they are not allowed to use family planning methods in protecting themselves from unplanned pregnancies and girls were also told that they are not supposed to speak about condoms. But now things have changed. A girl is able to access family planning to prevent unplanned pregnancies. Girls also know the right way of using condoms to prevent sexually transmitted infections.” (Girl, age 22, Chiwalo)

“If we go to Thyolo hospital and ask the number of teenage pregnancies and compare it to the other TAs where there is no such interventions you will discover that this one very much improved.” (Community leader, Mchiramwera)

Despite progress made by ENGAGE, negative attitudes and misconceptions about girls—especially their use of contraception—persist in the communities.

“The faith leaders seem not to like the change because according to them it causes problems in girls, they say ‘why should someone who has never had a child use family planning methods?’” (Girl, age 20, Chiwalo)

### **Initiation camps**

While initiation camps and ceremonies of some kind were still common in these communities, participants noted they had changed substantially over time, in terms of structure, content and people’s attitudes toward the camps. In line with what we observed at midline, participants at endline distinguished between traditional and religious initiation, and it appeared that there had been a general shift in all communities—including Nazombe, the control site—toward religious ceremonies, which focus more on obedience, modest dress, and good behavior as well as menstrual hygiene and puberty, compared to traditional camps, where the focus was on preparing girls for sex and marriage. Some participants reported that initiation of any kind was less common now than in the past and many girls did not attend any formal initiation ceremony but were instead counselled at

their homes by relatives and religious or local leaders.

Specific changes to the structure of the camps included separating girls of different age groups, so that attendees receive age-appropriate information. This was seen as a significant improvement because in the past very young girls were mixed with older teenagers, and the information they received was seen as not appropriate for them.

“In the past, they used to involve a lot of young children, the ones who had not even had their period, but now... they are only getting those have reached menarche. If a mother initiates her underage child, she is fined.”  
(Girl, age 16, Changata)

Changes were also described in the timing of the camps. While in the past girls might be pulled out of school to attend the camps, which could last as long as a month, participants described that camps had become much shorter—between one and three days—and were held only during school holidays so that girls’ learning was not interrupted.

In addition to the structure and attendees of the camps, participants described changes to the content, including standardization of the curriculum. Key topics mentioned as part of the updated curriculum included SRHR, menstruation, and menstrual hygiene and how to behave and dress properly.

“Initiation curriculum will help remove the bad things that the children were being taught and will replace them with SRHR, which means sexual reproductive health rights. So, in short we developed it... we facilitated the development of the curriculum.” (CSO Leader, Changata)

Sexual cleansing and “obscene” behaviors had been removed from the curriculum and were no longer part of the initiation practices.

“In the past, girls were taught more things about sex and were instructed to try it when they went back. But now the chiefs called for meetings with all initiation counsellors to stop those teachings and only to tell them religious things.... [Now] when the girls go to the initiation camps they are no longer



taught or asked to try anything about sex.” (Girl, age 18 in Form 4, Changata)

Most participants reported that these changes were met with positive reactions from the community, and there was a general sense that people believed girls should focus on school and avoid pregnancy, which people believed would follow the changes to the camps. Likewise, there had been a shift from believing that initiation is a necessary rite during a girls’ maturation to accepting that some girls may not want to undergo the ceremony.

“Judging from our meetings, many people seem to be happy because some of the bad things in the initiation ceremonies have changed.” (Community leader, Changata)

Some participants described initial hesitation and resistance from certain community members, especially traditional leaders, who had benefitted from the camps—traditionally, parents who wish to initiate their daughters begin the ceremony by presenting the chief with a gift. However, for the most part, even those who were initially resistant realized that girls’ rights were being violated and had changed their minds.

“Many parents just regarded the occurrences as normal culture and tradition of our society. However, with the coming of this organization people got to know the vices of initiation ceremonies. In collaboration with the chiefs, we agreed to end such practices.” (Girl, age 18, Changata)

“In the beginning they [community members] did not understand, but now they understand since we made them understand that the under-aged girls should not be taught about what married people do but rather should be told to concentrate on their education and respect their parents. That telling them what married people do affects them psychologically. By and by they understood” (Girl, age 22, Chiwalo)

However, there was a sense that it would not be possible to get rid of the camps completely—they were seen as a part of culture and tradition. Some girl leaders reported

that they had tried but failed to fully abolish the practice of initiation. Instead, it was possible only to make incremental changes to the practice.

“We tried our best to completely end initiation ceremonies, but we were not successful because it’s our culture. But... we should make sure those bad things we are against should not be happening.” (Girl, age 19, Changata).

“On the issue of initiation ceremonies, we wanted it to completely end but... we agreed that it’s only the sexual cleansing part that needs to end.” (Girl, age 16, Chiwalo)

### **Other Changes**

Participants described a few other changes that they saw in themselves and in their communities, outside of the key outcomes related to child marriage, education, sexual and reproductive health, and initiation camps.

Many respondents, especially CSO leaders, described an increase in girls’ empowerment, specifically in their confidence to speak out on issues like child marriage, advocate for themselves, and report on experiences of violence in their communities. Several adult respondents noted that this was a significant change from how girls behaved before the intervention.

“During our project implementation we have seen leaders, parents and girls themselves coming forward revealing the abuses that they face, while in the past girls would face abuses but not reveal.” (CSO Leader, Changata)

“More girls have been empowered. They used to look down on themselves but that changed.” (Girl, age 20, Chiwalo)

“The first thing I noticed was the openness of the girls to talk about things that affect them in their lives, something which was impossible for a long time. All along girls were not open enough to say what is affecting them but

that has changed and I think that is a good thing.” (Community leader, Changata)

Participants also talked about skill-building that had occurred for girls, and how girls developed employable skills in tailoring, sewing and farm work. One girl connected these skills to earning money to pay for school supplies for peers who could not afford them. Similarly, the perception of girls in the community appeared to have changed, so that girls were viewed as potential agents of change and capable of influencing their communities if given the right tools and education.

“The community began to see a girl child not as a bride but as somebody who would contribute to the development of the area in the future” (CSO Leader, Mchiramwera)

“There used to be many men who felt that a daughter cannot do as much as a son can. However, due to the expert advice that has enlightened men, now many men have the potential to try to make their daughters’ future better.” (Community leader, Changata)

In addition to the bylaws specifically passed related to child marriage, participants also discussed bylaws abolishing fines against girls who become pregnant and prevent girls and boys from going out at night.

“What used to happen in our area was that when a girl got pregnant, she would be fined a goat and was tried while pregnant. We saw that as a bad thing to subject a pregnant woman to a multitude of people. That’s why we made bylaws so the chiefs can change some of these things. So, as girls, we made our bylaws which we presented to the chief and he approved.” (Girl, age 18, Changata)

“There were laws established that state that no girl should be found walking around at night. Police unit officers were requested to conduct night supervisions and when a girl is found walking around at night, should be

caught and handed to the chief. Also, a boy that is found walking around at night should be handed over to the chief. This was done because of fear for continuation of the tendency of girls dropping out of school.” (Girl, age 19, Changata)

Finally, several participants reported that ENGAGE reduced the instance of violence against girls, including rape and forced marriage. When girls did experience violence, they now had access to appropriate and effective reporting channels that they were comfortable and confident to use. In some cases, participants described newly developed or codified mechanisms for reporting, while in other cases they noted mechanisms that may have existed previously but had not been widely used.

“People [in the community] come to us as the girl leaders and we arranged to meet their parents, advising them that what they are doing to their child is wrong and they risk being arrested if they continue. So many parents are scared and we have seen a decline in cases of violence.” (Girl, age 18, Changata)

Other changes, less frequently mentioned, included more equitable division of household chores among siblings, changes related to other traditional practices, including widow inheritance, a reduction in insults girls received from parents and peers, safer births and improvements in adolescent maternal health, and greater support among boys and men for girls’ rights.

### **SECTION 3: ADDITIONAL INSIGHTS IN THE ENGAGE COMMUNITIES**

#### **Norms and beliefs in Nazombe**

Four KIIs were conducted with stakeholders in Nazombe, which serves as the comparison community in our impact evaluation. While we await the findings of the quantitative survey to systematically compare Nazombe to the other three communities where some form of the intervention was conducted, the interviews in Nazombe shed light on the status of key outcomes, separate from the intervention.

As we observed elsewhere in these districts, in Nazombe child marriage is recognized as a serious concern, with implications for girls’ wellbeing and empowerment, and it is the target of ongoing activities. There was a familiar association between adolescent pregnancy—which stakeholders report is very common—child marriage and education, and a strong

desire to interrupt that association.

“With the messages that are coming [from other organizations] people are aware that child marriages are not good because more children are dying while pregnant and even having complications when delivering which shows that it’s not yet time for them to get married.” (Community leader, Nazombe)

Despite these shifts in attitudes, however, child marriage was still prevalent, indicating that the practice may not have been curbed to the same extent as in the other three TAs.

“There are a lot of child marriages in our community. There are messages being spread and by and by people have started to realize the importance of sending adolescents to school. But it is not possible for this to be successful immediately. There is still a group of parents who are still stuck in the past.” (Community leader, Nazombe)

Initiation ceremonies were also trending toward religious camps and away from traditional camps, which had been banned, along with other harmful practices. Organizations have worked with initiation camp leaders to identify and end harmful behaviors and parts of the camp.

“Traditional initiation ceremonies use obscene language, singing obscene songs and tell them to go do sexual cleansing by sleeping with a man so here us chiefs we banned all that while at church they use Bible teachings.” (Community leader, Nazombe)

Attitudes toward contraception and adolescent girls’ sexual activity appeared to be more negative in Nazombe than elsewhere. Stakeholders there more readily described girls who have sex as promiscuous, and more fiercely suggested that they should not engage in such behavior.

“The issue is that when the girls come of age and start having sexual intercourse they do not listen when you tell them to stop. It’s like they have

experienced something good for the first time. But there are also some who abstain and listen to their parents when they are told to do certain things. However, the other ones are just promiscuous.” (Community leader, Nazombe)

Finally, attitudes toward girls’ education may be trending more positive, but practical barriers, like poverty, still exist.

“Most parents are aware of our responsibility towards our child’s education... the willingness is there but because of poverty you find that the child will go to school up to standard 8 and is selected to start Form 1 but lacks small things like uniforms, exercise books.” (Community leader, Nazombe)

These findings from Nazombe confirm what we learned at baseline and at midline: that attitudes surrounding adolescent girls were in the process of a major shift in these communities brought on, at least in part, by the work of local and international organizations and programming with aims like those of ENGAGE. Initiation camps have changed significantly in recent decades, in similar ways to the patterns of change ENGAGE supported in intervention communities. Attitudes toward child marriage and girls’ education were perhaps the most positive, with most community members believing that girls should avoid marriage and stay in school. In practice, however, in Nazombe as in other communities, the realization of these attitudes has been impacted by practical barriers to continuing school.

Attitudes toward girls’ sexual activity and use of contraception appeared to be much more negative in Nazombe compared to the other three communities. These attitudes may contribute to concerns about adolescent girls’ behavior and regard for adolescent girls in sexual relationships as promiscuous. Similarly, these stakeholders did not describe any hope for girls in their community to be agents of change in the way that adults in the other communities did. While we did not ask this question directly and are cautious in drawing comparative conclusions, the absence of these attitudes in the control group is notable, and points to the possibility that the ENGAGE interventions instilled a belief in girls’ agency.

### **Influence of the COVID-19 pandemic**

Although most of ENGAGE’s program work was concluded by the time the COVID-19 pandemic came to Malawi, the implications from the pandemic were wide-spread and appeared to have directly impacted the ENGAGE’s outcomes of interest, such as child

marriage. The main pathway of influence was through school closures. Schools in study communities were shuttered for approximately five months because of the pandemic. Most participants said that due to girls not being in school, many involved themselves in relationships, became pregnant and entered marriage.

“The main problem is... low self-esteem. Some of the girls I was chatting with, they are now married. They are married not because they want to get married but rather because they are pregnant due to this COVID-19 holiday. If I ask them about the reason, they said the holiday was too long. The result they get married in order to get support for the pregnancy and the baby.” (Girl, age 19, Changata)

Obstacles that arose because of the COVID-19 pandemic to girls’ SRH included reduced access to health facilities and hospitals, especially with respect to contraception services. Mask mandates meant that girls who showed up without a mask at the facilities were turned away and, as the distance from their home was great, served as a deterrent for follow up care. In addition, a few participants mentioned that nearly all community resources were diverted to COVID-19 effort, leaving SRH and child marriage-related programming paused or terminated.

Girls and CSO leaders alike blamed the pandemic for backtracking the work they had done in these communities to reduce marriage, increase girls’ participation in school, among other outcomes. As one CSO leader noted:

“This pandemic has largely affected girls... up to now.... Firstly, they stopped going to school since when COVID-19 approached, schools were closed.... COVID-19 influenced a lot of girls to get married and become pregnant... [Others] have a negative attitude toward school, and they decided to drop out of school. Why did they develop negative attitude? In 6 months, children have been out of school, it’s a long period whereby a child has increased both in terms of height, body, size and maturity... Some of the girls started small businesses, which give them a little money. So, they don’t see any profit at school, and they opt to drop out of school and continue

with their businesses of distilling alcohol and other businesses.” (CSO Leader, Mchiramwera)

### **Community experience with the SMS and radio component of ENGAGE**

ENGAGE implemented an SMS and radio campaign with YONECO as part of their programming. Phones were given to some ENGAGE girl leaders in both Chiwalo and Changata, with the intention that they would receive encouraging messages related to family planning and education that they would share with the other girls in their clubs. In the radio campaign, ENGAGE developed radio spots with YONECO that focused on the consequences of child marriage and other related aspects. For both activities, a hotline number was provided so that if and as girls had questions or wanted to report a violation of child marriage laws, they had someone to call.

The ICRW team did not formally evaluate the SMS or radio campaigns. However, at endline, the team asked all participants about their experience with and exposure to these activities, along with their feedback. Here is what we learned:

#### **About the SMS activity**

Many girls participating in the research received a phone. Of these, most but not all received the SMS messages. Some girls reported that they did not receive messages but knew of others in their community who did and were able to articulate the types of messages received.

The predominate messages that girls received were about using family planning as an empowering life choice and staying in school. Girls reported feeling good about these messages. Some said that it helped them to understand “right from wrong” and tease out “lies” that they heard in the community related to contraception causing infertility.

A few girls talked about girls they knew went to a clinic for a method of contraception after receiving the messages. One participant personally went.

“We have learned a lot [from the messages], as girls we used to look down on ourselves that we should not look down on ourselves, they also sent family planning messages and many other messages.” (Girl, age 16, Changata)

“I have one child but when I received the message [via SMS] I was not using any contraceptive method, but after I received the message and also



because am willing to go back to school I went to the hospital and am now using nor plant [Implanon] as a contraceptive method.” (Girl, age 19, Chiwalo)

Most girls and a few stakeholders mentioned that there were issues with the phones that prevented them from being useful, including damaged batteries, inability to hold a charge, inability to get the Sim card to work, etc.

“We received the phones but let’s say there were not that good; we only used for one week and then they stopped functioning” (Girl, age 21, Chiwalo)

At few stakeholders indicated that acceptance of girls using phones by various community members was low, as they perceived it meant girls were “wayward” and/or only using them to talk to boyfriends.

“A lot of parents complained about the phones you gave to the girls. They were saying that these phones are helping girls to communicate with their boyfriends. You made a mistake by giving these phones to these girls.” (Community leader, Changata)

### **About the radio and hotline**

Most participants had heard about the radio programming. They discussed hearing content related to the negative consequences of early marriage and the importance of girls showing “self-control” so they can stay in school. Nearly all participants said they really liked the content.

“People love listening to this radio and they usually talk about issues to do with girls. At first it was only us as chiefs who talked about such things when we got directives from the T/A but now that radios are giving out the same messages we have been circulating we feel so good and organizations like yours coming to our communities talking about the very same issues makes people believe that actually we do have a point here that these issues are not mere hearsays.” (Community leader, Mchiramwera)

## Discussion

Overall, the ENGAGE program was well-received in intervention communities. The strategies of engaging girls and building capacities of local organizations were seen as the program's greatest strengths and the most promising for its sustainability and ability to achieve lasting, meaningful change. ENGAGE participants are highly optimistic about the program's impact.

Despite initial challenges in securing community support and buy-in for the program, the support of adults, especially local leaders, eventually grew and community members, according to participants, have largely adopted the attitudes ENGAGE promoted. In general, participants reported that the community was pleased with the changes occurring in these communities related to child marriage, girls' education, adolescent sexual and reproductive health, harmful traditional practices, and gender equality.

Child marriage, education and unintended pregnancy remain deeply interlinked in these communities. Evidence from both baseline and midline suggested that child marriage is a norm in transition, more often a choice made for prudential reasons than normative ones. Those previous iterations of this study revealed that girls' unmet contraceptive needs – and resultant pregnancy – coupled with a real and perceived lack of opportunity to succeed in school and after graduation were key drivers of child marriage.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, child marriage and pregnancy were themselves drivers of school dropout, while child marriage and school dropout were drivers of adolescent pregnancy. All three of these were also closely linked to initiation camps, which traditionally prepare girls for marriage, imposing the expectation that girls that have attended are ready to marry, can lead to adolescent pregnancy if girls experience *kusasa fumbi* or are otherwise instructed to engage in sex and can interrupt girls' education if they are held during school terms.

ENGAGE intended and appears to have helped achieve desired shifts in key attitudes and behaviors by interrupting pathways in several ways. Because education was viewed as an alternative to marriage, ENGAGE's efforts to improve girls' attitudes toward school and those of community members and key decision-makers toward the utility of girls' schooling appear to have successfully reduced child marriages in these communities. The reverse is also true: reducing child marriage rates seems to have allowed more girls to continue their education. Meanwhile, by supporting pregnant girls' and adolescent mothers' right to return to school, ENGAGE may have interrupted the pathway by which pregnancy leads to school dropout. We hope to be able to further elucidate the change in these pathways with the quantitative endline data.

In addition, our findings suggest that a significant driver of change is fear of sanctions and other negative consequences for failing to comply with new laws. Participants perceived

parents felt afraid that they would face fines, for instance, if their underage daughters were married or out of school. Similarly, girls feared being punished for being out late or for being in sexual relationships.

However, while we did see promising shifts in attitudes, particularly toward education, some behaviors persisted. Child marriage had not ended completely, and elopements especially were still practiced, to some extent, by adolescents. These were perhaps seen as a loophole to the child marriage laws and a way of avoiding the sanctions threatened. In addition, attitudes toward girls' use of contraception have improved somewhat, but the extent to which girls obtain and use contraception was not clear.

Some evidence suggests that both girls and adults in these communities hold negative views of adolescent sexuality and romantic relationships. Several participants support camps and other programming for adolescent girls that teaches "good behavior," including modesty and abstinence, and chastise girls in the community who have boyfriends or otherwise engage in sexual relationships. Additional programming is needed to further improve gender equitable attitudes and increase community acceptance of girls' sexual and reproductive rights.

One take-away from this research was that girls felt empowered through the process. Girls reported not only gains in communication and public speaking, but increased self-esteem and confidence in their ability to speak on issues related to their own rights. Yet, at the same time, our findings indicate that girls need support from others to do their work. Community support was primarily achieved through chiefs and other adult leaders, and girls reported that only with the endorsement of these individuals were their activities accepted by the community. As several adult participants recalled, there were spaces in the communities where girls could not work alone or were overshadowed, such as in meetings with chiefs. In addition, that girls faced such significant backlash from parents in the form of physical and emotional abuse – and that, again, it was only solved by interference from chiefs and other adults – signifies that girls are not fully empowered in their communities. Finally, it is undeniable that the COVID-19 pandemic eroded progress made by the ENGAGE program. Girls were out of school, and according to girl and adult participants, found themselves in difficult circumstances as a result, which ultimately led them to pregnancy and/or marriage. We may never know the true impact.

## QUALITATIVE ENDLINE EVALUATION FINDINGS IN CONTEXT

There are several considerations that contextualize this qualitative endline evaluation. First, we must be cautious to attribute outcomes like a decrease in child marriage solely to the ENGAGE program. One reason is that most research participants were active participants in the ENGAGE program and had a stake in hoping the program did well to achieve its goals. Additionally, our qualitative analysis was not set up to compare intervention and comparison communities in terms of impact. We noted some differences between Chiwalo

and Changata when presenting results but any robust comparison of communities should be left to the quantitative data. In addition, we only held four interviews with members of the comparison community (Nazombe) using slightly different interview guides.

Finally, our analysis revealed several other important organizations and services in the community that either supplemented the work that ENGAGE did, or directly complimented it. From all participant groups we frequently heard of other programs and the coordination of ENGAGE with and between these other programs, such as those implemented by Norwegian Church Aid, UNICEF, Camfed, and Plan International as well as other local efforts like youth clubs and mothers' groups. This means that knowing whether it was ENGAGE or another program (or some combination) fostered the changes we saw, such as a reduction in child marriage, is challenged. Relatedly, in the CSO-only community (Mchiramwera), a girls' group like the ENGAGE girls' groups was created at the same time. This in effect made Arms 2 and 3 similar, diminishing the integrity of our study design. The ENGAGE project adopted an empowerment-based programming approach, meaning it was intended to be adaptive to girls and other community members' needs. Several changes to content and activities were made after the program began that were not considered in the theory of change upon which the evaluation was designed, and therefore not extensively explored or addressed in the research. This includes the male engagement aspects of the program, which were added upon recognition that men and boys needed and desired to be involved in the project.

## Conclusion

Our qualitative endline research indicates that ENGAGE made a difference in the communities where it was implemented. Not only did girls and CSO leaders gain skills that empowered them, but they in turn feel they have empowered their own communities, ultimately leading to shifts in attitudes, beliefs, and practices related to child marriage, education and sexually and reproductive health. We await the results from the quantitative endline survey to conduct the full contribution analysis and make recommendations for future programming and research on issues related to girls' equality in Southern Malawi.

---

<sup>1</sup> Girls Not Brides. [Child Marriage around the World: Malawi](#) [Internet]. Girls Not Brides. 2020 [cited 2020 Dec 30].

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Traditional Authorities are an administrative level below district.

<sup>4</sup> Area Development Committees provide oversight for all development activities at the Traditional Authority level. Responsibilities include mobilizing people and resources, monitoring project implementation and enacting bylaws. Committees report to the Traditional Authority leadership. Each Traditional Authority is subdivided into village clusters of 5-12 villages; these clusters are headed by Group Village Headmen. Group Village Headmen are represented within the relevant Area Development Committee.

<sup>5</sup> Steinhaus, M., Hinson, L., Rizzo, A. T., Gregowski, A. (2019). Measuring Social Norms Related to Child Marriage Among Adult Decision-Makers of Young Girls in Phalombe and Thyolo, Malawi. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 64*(4), S37-S44.

**Recommended Citation:**

Hinson, L., Schaub E., and Phiri F. (2021). *Perceived community changes from the ENGAGE project (2017 – 2020) in Southern Malawi: Findings from qualitative endline research*. International Center for Research on Women, Washington DC.