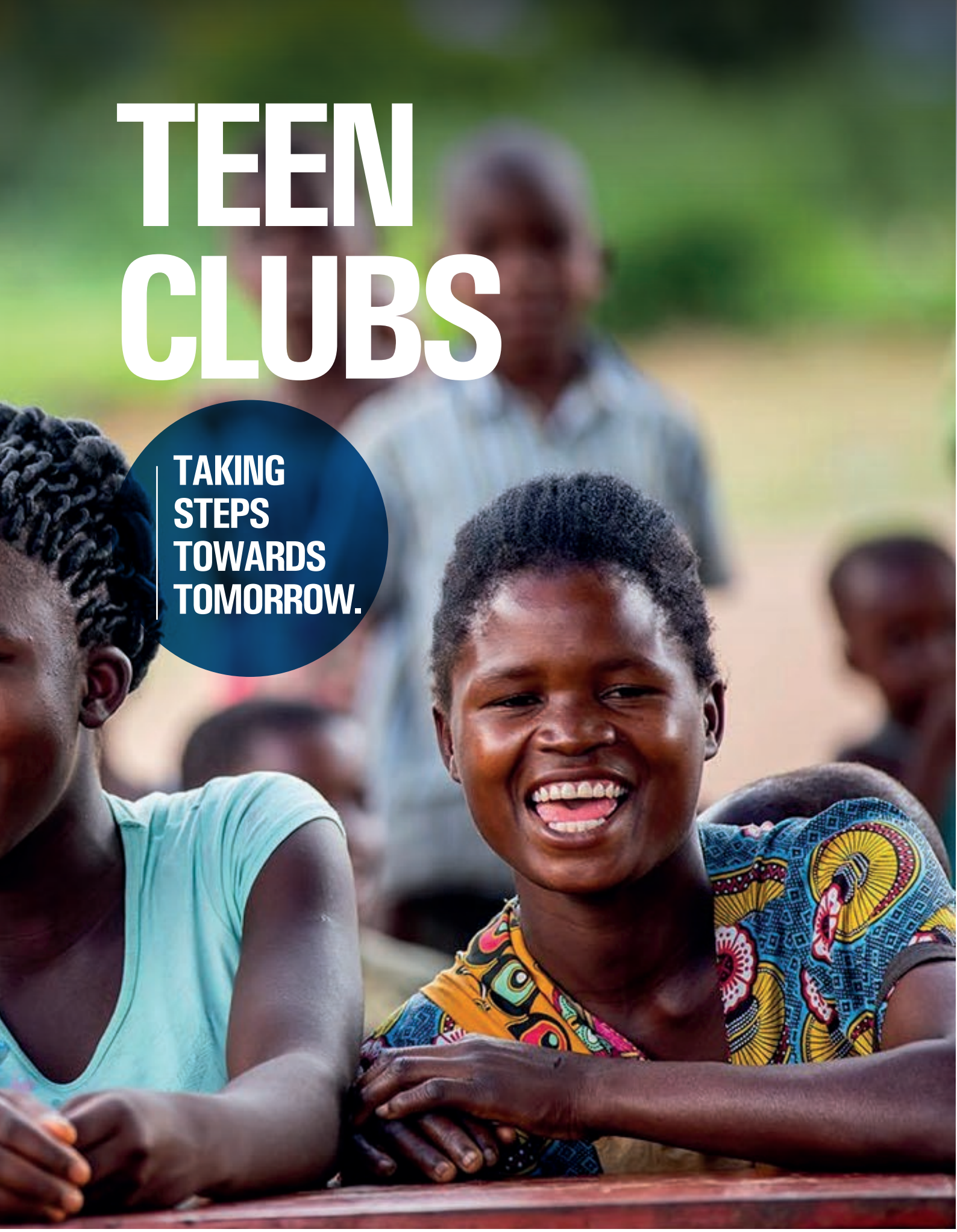
TEEN CLUBS

TAKING STEPS TOWARDS TOMORROW.



2gether 4SRHR

Sweden
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Teen Clubs

Taking Steps Towards Tomorrow.

2019

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Introduction

UNICEF, along with three UN counterparts (WHO, UNFPA and UNAIDS) and the Government of Malawi are implementing a four-year (2018-2023) project to strengthen integrated sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR)/HIV and Sexual & Gender Based Violence (SGBV) services in three districts in Malawi. The project, called 2gether 4 SRHR, is funded by the Swedish Government.

In collaboration with its implementing partners, UNICEF set up a model that helps adolescents to work through the challenges associated with HIV with the support of trained health and social workers. One of the many challenges Adolescents living with HIV (ALHIV) experience is sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). UNICEF is therefore supporting Teen Clubs in Malawi to integrate SGBV into their services.

Prisca (16 yrs, yellow T-shirt) the bright future youth group leader and Meria, the adolescent champion (19 year old, white t-shirt) enjoy a game together during one of their Teen Club meetings ©UNICEF Malawi/2019/Schermbrucker.

19.7
million people

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Malawi has an estimated population of 19.7 million people with a median age of 17.5 years (United Nations, 2019). Malawi's HIV prevalence is one of the highest in the world, with 9.2% of the adult population aged between 15-49 living with HIV. Adolescents living with HIV (ALHIV) are especially vulnerable as they have to manage their illness and cope with mental development, physical change and HIV-stigmas in communities.

If someone at school contracts HIV, it is very likely they will stop going to school for fear of being mocked or ridiculed. But through the Teen Group we have been taught the benefit of testing. There are 40 members in our group - 30 of them now know their status. - *Meria (19yrs)*

Meria (19 yrs) - the adolescent champion leads a discussion during one of the Teen Club meetings in Mulanje, Malawi ©UNICEF Malawi/2019/Schermbrucker

The Teen Club model was set up to provide a forum for adolescents to work through the challenges associated with HIV with the support of trained health and social workers.

For many, the network creates a peer network of ALHIV (adolescents living with HIV). Their main mission is to provide a safe and nurturing environment for adolescents in which they can build supportive relationships, increase their self-esteem and develop and reinforce good habits such as taking the first step in testing for HIV.

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Portrait of Prisca (16 yrs) the bright future youth group leader of the Teen Club in Mulanje ©UNICEF Malawi/2019/Schermbrucker

UNICEF plays an active role in working with the Teen Club model. Through UNICEF, the teen clubs are operational in several districts across the country including, Mulanje.

"Our teen group started in 2017 with a mentor mother coming to visit us. During the group we discuss topics such as family planning and the importance of testing for HIV. This training has helped us a lot. Before the group none of us realised how important testing for HIV was." -
Prisca (16 yrs)

Mulanje District Hospital, Mulanje Malawi ©UNICEF Malawi/2019/Schermbrucker

One of many challenges ALHIV (Adolescents living with HIV) experience is sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). This is still a major concern in Malawi. Recent research indicates that in 2016, an estimated 34 percent of women aged 15-49 have experienced physical violence while 21 percent have experienced sexual violence (MSH, 2018). Under 2gether 4 SRHR, a Joint UN programme funded by the Government of Sweden, UNICEF is supporting Teen Clubs to integrate SGBV into their services.

"The training has taught me more about family planning and abuse. The group also helps those who are being subjected to abuse. Now I am able to explain to people what abuse is about and what to do." ***– Caroline (member of the teen group)***

The examination room at the One-Stop-Centre ©UNICEF Malawi/2019/Schermbrucker.

According to Dr Morris (clinical officer at the Mulanje District Hospital), the majority of victims of sexual and gender based violence in Mulanje are females aged 4-16 years old. He says, "One of the greatest contributors towards the high prevalence of SGBV is cultural beliefs, such as having sex with a child will cure you of HIV, and a general lack of knowledge within the community that what they are doing is wrong."

My focus here as a community leader is to take these cases into the community and have the whole prosecution take place there. This is the best way to sensitise people in the community that what they are doing is wrong. Things will change with a good approach, but change needs to come from within the community." ***- Dr Morris***

Partners of the SRH/SGBV/HIV (Sexual and Reproductive Health/ Sexual Gender-based violence) project meet at the Mulanje hospital to ensure perpetrators of gender based violence are convicted and victims are helped ©UNICEF Malawi/2019/Schermbrucker

In order to address the high number of SGBV cases in Malawi, Baylor with support from UNICEF implemented the SRH/SGBV/HIV (Sexual and Reproductive Health/ Sexual Gender-based violence) project. The project has seen key role players from government departments and civil society's institutions coming together to learn to understand the concept of integrated Sexual Gender-Based Violence and how it is interconnected to HIV. The result has been regular meetings between the Ministry of Health, the DHO (District Health officer) and hospital staff, Ministry of Gender, Social Welfare, the Judiciary and the Police service. These meetings have helped coordinate management of SGBV cases in the district, especially those involving adolescents and minors. In addition to the meetings, a One-Stop-Centre has also been built on the hospital grounds for victims of sexual and gender based violence.

The Mulanje District Hospital One-Stop centre, set up by UNICEF to help victims immediately after they have experienced sexual or gender based violence ©UNICEF Malawi/2019/Schermbrucker

The One-Stop-Centre has been operating since July 2017 and is successfully delivering medical, social welfare and police services at one place, thereby increasing the number of children, adolescents and women coming out to access the services after suffering gender based violence (GBV) including sexual abuse in their communities.

"The benefit of the One-Stop-Centre for survivors of GBV, is that they are able to access all services - from social, to medical and police in one place. Before the One-Stop-Centre cases of sexual violence could take over two years to go to court. But now it takes less than one month." ***- Dr Morris***

Teenage girls enjoying a moment at the teen club in Mulanje, Malawi ©UNICEF Malawi/2019/Schermbrucker

According to UNAIDS, HIV incidence is starting to decline in many of the most severely affected countries because adolescents and young people are adopting safer sexual practices. However, in regions with available data, recent testing coverage remains below 20 per cent for adolescents. Hopefully with the growth of the teen clubs, and the implementation of safe and nurturing environments for adolescents, supportive relationships will start being built, resulting in an increase in self-esteem and the courage to start taking the first step in testing for HIV.

I urge my fellow youth living with HIV to never look down on yourself, be resilient, discover your potential and live positively" ***- words of a graduate from one of the Baylor Teen Clubs in Malawi.***

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