



**A marriage between a child and an adult in Malawi marks the beginning of a personal tragedy for the child involved.**

Along with the “marriage” itself, the harmful traditional practice often includes sexualized violence and becoming a parent during childhood.

While other children are going to school and playing with their friends, child brides in Malawi suffer harm and emotional trauma.

Initiation ceremonies are a common practice in the country and sometimes expose children to sexual activity. The ceremonies are supposed to inform girls and boys about sex, sexuality and maternal health. However, in some tribal communities, harmful practices involving sexual acts take place, damaging the children, both physically and mentally.

Moreover, the practice undermines the ability of girls and boys to recognize and report sexual abuse, and increases exposure to sexually transmitted diseases and possible pregnancy.

The impacts of child marriage on girls can be severe. Many drop out of primary and secondary school, and are at risk of early pregnancy injuries such as fistula. Tragically, more than 80 per cent of child brides experience physical abuse from their husbands. Child marriage also contributes to high birth rates, a major factor driving Malawi’s population growth.

## Child Marriage in Malawi

Child marriage is a serious problem in Malawi. The 2017 constitutional amendment raising the age of marriage to 18, for both boys and girls, was a significant milestone. However, many cases of child marriage persist. About 46 per cent of girls are married before the age of 18, and 9 per cent before the age of 15. The main drivers of child marriage are poverty, cultural and religious traditions, and peer pressure. Child marriage is often associated with limited education and employment opportunities, and is seen as a way of protecting girls from out of wedlock pregnancy. Adolescents are sometimes exposed to sexual activity at initiation ceremonies, which can lead to sex with peers and early marriages. UNICEF is working with the Government of Malawi to protect girls and boys from sexualized violence including child marriage and other harmful traditional practices. An important aim of UNICEF’s Child Protection Programme is increased knowledge and understanding among communities of harm associated with child marriage. UNICEF works to abolish practices and behaviours harmful to children, while ensuring they have access to child protection services.

### Partnerships with community leaders break social norms that enable child marriages

UNICEF is partnering with traditional and religious leaders to break social norms that enable child marriages. Social and cultural beliefs relating to sexuality, child marriage, corporal punishment and the position of girls in society, contribute to the normalization of violence against children and gender-based violence. Substantial investment is required to change social norms and help break the silence around practices that harm children. This includes building an evidence base around child marriage and harmful traditional practices.

### Scaling up community responses to child protection

UNICEF is supporting the Government’s effort to strengthen community responses to child protection. This includes increasing the number of child protection services such as victim support groups, frontline child protection workers and Children’s Corners, safe environments for recreation, child rights education, life skills education, management of HIV/AIDS, and provision of psychosocial support. UNICEF supports the Ministry of Gender, Children, Disability and Social Welfare (MoGCDSW) operation of Children’s Corners, which target 6 to 18 year olds. Since child marriage is often linked to vulnerabilities, poverty and school dropout, Children’s Corners provide a positive environment in the community where children receive services and information that help respond to their developmental needs and prevent child marriage. UNICEF also works with the police and the judiciary to strengthen child-friendly justice systems, providing victims of violence, including child brides, better access to justice.

### Creating safe environments in schools

UNICEF partners with the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, Malawi Police and the MoGCDSW in the Safe Schools Programme. The programme plays a vital role in the campaign against child marriage. It seeks to reduce gender-based violence in and around schools, and empowers girls by equipping them with skills to reduce risks associated with sexual violence. The programme also works with boys, supporting them to become “champions of change” and promote non-violent behaviour and gender equality while challenging accepted gender norms.



Eliza studies at home. She was offered for marriage at the age of 14.

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## 'I don't want to be that girl': hunger forces parents to marry off young girls

By Joseph Scott, UNICEF Malawi

Beneath the seeming beauty of Mangochi, Malawi lies a tradition that has for years deprived girls the chance to pursue their dreams. Many of them are married off at a tender age to men with a little more money than their parents. One of these girls is 16 year old Eliza who was caught in an early marriage snare some two years ago.

**"It all started when my father approached his friend offering to marry me to his son who was working in South Africa,"** recalls Eliza who is the second oldest child in a family of seven. **"The friend agreed and my father was given MK20,000 (\$28 USD) and two mobile phones."** She adds: **"I was so angry when my father told me to stop school and prepare for marriage. I had never thought of getting married before. My dream was to continue with my education and become self-reliant,"** she says.

Like many farming families in the area, Eliza parents had a poor harvest because of drought and erratic rains, caused by El Nino. As the hunger started to bite, Eliza's father saw a way out of the crisis by offering his daughter for marriage. However, her mother was opposed to the idea—she wanted Eliza to continue with her education.

Eliza's chance to go back to school came when UNICEF in collaboration with PLAN International and Ujamaa Pamodzi introduced some reflection action circles in her village targeting girls who had dropped out of school for various reasons. Reflection action circles is an approach where community members and learners meet to discuss issues of violence and abuse affecting children. Through the discussions, they reflect on the causes of the problem and likely results and come up with a plan on how to overcome and deal with such issues.

The project has been a success as 28 girls have been re-admitted back to school through the reflection action circles. Eliza is one of them: **"I was excited when I was chosen to attend the reflect circles with other girls in our village who had also dropped out of school,"** she says. **"This opportunity made me to reflect on my future and I made the decision to go back to school. I want to become a doctor,"** she continues. **"I feel this job will not only help me support my mother and siblings financially, but also help the sick,"** says Eliza who is now back in school and in Standard 7.

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