



COMMUNITY-LED APPROACHES TO ENDING CHILD MARRIAGE IN MALAWI

Image: Firelight

Child marriage derails the lives of thousands of young people in Malawi, impacting their families and whole communities around them. Despite global recognition of the scale and consequences of the practice, and the millions of dollars invested to tackle it, the country retains one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world.

This information brief shows how it is possible to deliver real and lasting change in the rates of child marriage by taking a community-led approach to systems change and harnessing local power structures, first, to help prevent marriages and, second, to rescue girls from those that have already taken place.

It focuses on the Firelight Foundation's Ending Child Marriage (ECM) program of work in five Malawi communities, exploring the factors behind the program's success, the scale of its impact across the five communities, and the lessons learned over the five years in which it operated.

ENDING CHILD MARRIAGE IN MALAWI

Child marriage is a violation of Article 16(2) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and has recognized negative impacts on girls, including interrupted education and heightened risks of poverty, violence and health complications.

However, while child marriage is illegal in Malawi, 38% of the country's girls marry before the age of 18, encouraged by weak implementation of the law, extreme poverty, negative social norms and other societal factors that drive families to perpetuate what is, for many, still seen as a socially acceptable practice and a means of covering household expenses or dealing with the family shame of young girls who have become pregnant.

Firelight works in Africa, raising funds to then partner with community-based organizations and the communities around them to realize shared visions of change.

Its ECM focus in Malawi has bucked this trend over five years by recognizing the role that poverty and social norms play in promoting the practice, and the part that entire communities have to play in ending it.

Working with community-based organizations (CBOs), its support from 2023 to the end of 2025 ended 428 marriages and prevented many more by rescuing more than 770 girls before the ceremonies could take place.

These successes, and the collaborative approach to working with the government to end child marriage, led to Firelight and its CBO partners contributing to the Government of Malawi's National Strategy on Ending Child Marriage (2024–2030).

In addition, Firelight is expanding its work as part of a new initiative called 'Protecting Girls, Transforming Futures'. This effort brings together the Government of Malawi, the Children's Investment Fund Foundation and UNICEF with implementing partners such as Firelight in ten districts over five years.



Image: Firelight

TAKING A COMMUNITY-DRIVEN APPROACH TO ECM

Starting in 2019, Firelight worked with existing partners and Malawi's Ministry of Gender, Children, Disability and Social Welfare to identify community-based organizations (CBOs) with the local knowledge and expertise needed to pioneer the required community-led systems change approach in each of five different districts of the country: Zomba, Mangochi, Balaka, Dedza and Phalombe.

Whereas many development programs impose delivery targets from the outset, the Firelight approach began with a year of learning and planning so partners could focus on laying the right foundations for change and build the stakeholder relationships that they needed to overcome deeply rooted practices.

The five selected CBOs spent their 'learning year' researching the root causes of the child marriages and the nature of the problem in their areas so they could understand the precise involvement of all stakeholders and the likely consequences of different actions taken along the chain of events leading to child marriage and leading from the child's rescue from the marriage. Their extensive consultations meant working with traditional and religious leaders, child protection officers, parents and other local stakeholders to develop a deep understanding of the nature of the problem so they could design initiatives which considered the needs of all stakeholders and build capacity to ultimately transform local attitudes to ECM.

Their holistic approach recognized that many child marriages are driven by poverty, with parents keen to pass financial responsibility for their daughters on to someone else, and involved working with communities to develop saving schemes and alternative sources of income, such as very small scale farming which meant girls freed from marriage could return to homes with more resilient economies (typical support involved a 'goat pass on' scheme where families were given a goat and encouraged to pass on its kids to the next family). The income-generating projects were also a key way to involve men, which had been a request of the communities.

CBOs worked with 'Mother Groups' – a government recognized structure comprised of groups of mothers formed in local communities around the country to act as a bridge between the communities and schools, helping prepare girls for life back at school without the stigmatization previously experienced on their return to class. The Mother Groups also played a key role in making sure that parents of returning girls were prepared to play their part in caring for their new grandchildren so that their daughters could return to school.

The five CBOs were based many miles from each other but came together for quarterly meetings to share learnings. Meetings were also attended by stakeholders from the communities. Traditional leaders in a particularly progressive district, Dedza, also hosted many visits from peers in the other areas and these became a platform for sharing learning and impacts around their specific successes.



Image: Firelight

ACHIEVING IMPACT

The success of the ECM program across the five districts is not simply measured in terms of the number of marriages ended or averted over the five years.

Among the survivors and those at risk, 229 girls were re-enrolled in school and 216 enrolled in vocational training centers. Beyond the statistics, there are personal transformation stories of survivors like Phenny Saidi who now wants to study to be a nurse so she can help her community, and others who have studied to become teachers.

More fundamentally, the program's success has resulted in a clear shift in attitudes across all five communities, with families no longer immobilized by the sense of shame when one of their young girls becomes pregnant and in the foundations for lasting change that it has created.

Its success is also reflected in the sustainability of the CBOs charged with facilitating community support to address ECM challenge, with many developing alternative incomes (such as milling maize) so they can keep working after the end of their program funding.

There are new systems, too, with improved reporting networks now linking mother groups, child protection workers, community-based organizations, social welfare officers, and police. This coordination is making it possible to dissolve cases more quickly and safely.

CBOs themselves are confident that they have built so much support among stakeholders – from traditional and religious leaders through to government and parents themselves – that they can act before any further planned marriages even get off the ground – effectively ending child marriage in their areas.

Comments from specific stakeholder groups reinforce their confidence, with religious leaders regularly preaching to discourage child marriage in their communities and tell their communities about the need for girls to be in school and parents themselves now proactively approaching their local CBO to alert them when they think their daughter has eloped to get married.

KEY LEARNING POINTS

The five-year project across the five communities has highlighted the following valuable lessons on everything from selection of CBOs to building grass-roots support:

Selection of CBOs that were 'born and bred' in the community was a key factor in the success of the program. Further, Firelight's investment in time and money to identify the best CBOs to work with from the outset was fundamental;

Impact across a district could be increased by first selecting a district with a high incidence of child marriages and then allocating different villages to different CBOs in that district. The original cluster used a different system where just one CBO worked in each district and focused on a maximum of 3 villages;

Engaging community leaders from the outset is also key to ensuring the depth and longevity of their engagement;

Enabling community leaders to do what they do – and lead – is key to sustaining their active support once they are engaged in ECM projects;

While changes in community attitudes to ECM are robust, the experience of CBOs suggests that government needs to act to establish broad initiatives which ensure the financial resilience of households increasingly impacted by the effects of climate change.