

# Chasing Wisdom

In the rural districts of Malawi—a beautiful country and the poorest in Africa—education (and a helping hand) is the key to unlocking a brighter and more self-sustainable future.

*By Yi-Hwa Hanna*



Her big brown eyes are downcast, her voice timid and unsteady. “You don’t have to say anything that makes you uncomfortable,” her social service aide says. “I know, it’s ok,” she says, hesitant at first and then bolder as she continues to speak. “I can tell them, they need to know,” she says. We don’t even know her name—it is confidential, a modicum of the privacy she can still retain after she was defiled as a child.

We were at a One Stop Centre in the Mzuzu District of Malawi. Built and supported by UNICEF, the centres are a refuge for victims of domestic violence, sexual assault and gender-based violence. While their main intent was to be a place for young women and children to come to when they’re in need—and this is still typically the bulk of who they serve—the centres welcome people of all ages, 24 hours a day. They provide free medical services—including HIV/AIDS testing—as well as counselling, protection from further violence, and help with investigation of crimes via the local police, as well as reintegration to society.

I’d travelled to the country with four of my colleagues, all of whom, like me, had been chosen to visit Malawi on a field trip with UNICEF. The purpose of our journey was to visit some schools that our company supports through a CSR initiative, with the aim of fostering education in the country, and to see first-hand what life in Malawi is like.



In a country where 51 percent of the population is made of up children, to say the future is held in the hands of the younger generations is not a topic to be taken lightly—and their education is an absolutely fundamental part of ensuring a brighter path. Figures from the World Bank show that as of 2010, more than 50 percent of the country’s population was living under the poverty line. Malawi was ranked at number 171 out of 187 on the United Nations Human Development Index Crisis in 2011/2012, and is one of the poorest countries in the world. And one of the major factors affecting the level of household poverty? Education. Schools—those in the rural areas in particular, where a vast majority of poor Malawians live—suffer from an extremely high drop-out rate, with about half of all children leaving before they complete their first four years, and only about a quarter completing the full eight years of their primary schooling.

While enrolment rates for male and female students are relatively equal when they begin their schooling, the drop-out rates for girls

are distressing—only 27% of them make it to enrolling in secondary school, with only 13% actually attending. In rural areas, the ratio of boys to girls in secondary education is 6:1. Research from the Chicago Council on Global Affairs claims that a 1% increase in female secondary school adds 0.3% to the country’s average annual per capita income growth. Among the various factors behind girls dropping out of school—including duties at home, the inability to afford secondary education, and the contraction of HIV/AIDS—pregnancy and marriage are a major cause.

In Malawi, nearly a third of girls are married before they reach the age of 20—many of them doing so as young as 15, which is the legal age for marriage. It’s in this age group—15-24 years old—that you’ll find the highest levels of HIV/AIDS prevalence in the country, with adolescent girls much more likely to be infected than adolescent boys. While some of the situations that lead to this are consensual, a disturbingly large number of cases are a result of defilement, or statutory rape. While reports



indicate that a shocking one in four children in Malawi will be raped, a 2011 report states that only 3 percent of sexually abused children between 12 and 18 years old reported it—and even more worryingly, 55 percent didn’t tell anyone about it. In communities where children either fear being ostracised by society—or harsh reprimands from their parents—or simply don’t realise they’re being taken advantage of, taking those numbers into account could be even more staggering. This is the goal of the One Stop Centres—to not only create a safe haven for victims, but also to increase awareness and empower both children and adults alike when it comes to

*Strong female role models, like the women running Mother's Groups, are important figures in Malawian society*



## DID YOU KNOW?

- A landlocked country, Malawi is bordered by Mozambique, Zambia and Tanzania.
- In 2011, the Malawi National Netball Team came 6th in the INF World Rankings and in 2012's Fast5 tournament—where they drew against Australia in 2010—they finished in 5th place.
- Lake Malawi was nicknamed "The Lake of the Stars" by celebrated Scottish explorer David Livingstone, because the lantern lights dangling from the fishermen's boats resembled the stars at night.
- Also known as Lake Nyasa, Lake Malawi is a freshwater lake that occupies a fifth of the country's total area. It's the ninth largest lake in the world (and the third largest in Africa), and it contains a larger variety of indigenous species of Cichlid fishes than any other lake in the world.
- A meaty white fish, Chambo is endemic to Malawi. It's one of the country's most loved and widely eaten delicacies, although it is now an endangered species.



others at that same centre, and across the country, have not been so lucky.

Affordable (or free) access to quality education is undoubtedly as important as trying to eradicate the reasons behind them dropping out, but equally crucial is the need to convince the girls to stay in school. With few notable female role models, many girls are lacking the vision of what they could do with their education. Among the four schools we visited, as well as the various other community centres, villages and children's centres, we couldn't help but notice how powerful the impact of a Mother's Group could be. In the schools and communities that boasted a

their sexual rights.

During our visit to the One Stop Centre, a client—the girl whose name we dared not take from her—was kind enough to speak with us. Just 15 years old, she had been a

victim of statutory rape by a 28-year-old. She is now, with the help of the One Stop Centre, re-enrolled in school and on good terms with her family again. She was lucky not to have contracted HIV. Many

- Outside of Denmark, Malawi is the only other country in the world that has a Carlsberg factory.

- The official languages of Malawi are Chichewa and English, although in certain districts and villages, other local languages are more commonly spoken.

- Mulanje Mountain in Southern Malawi is one of Africa's top trekking destinations, boasting a 3000m summit.

- Known as the "Warm Heart of Africa," Malawi is the safest country in Africa for tourists.

- Malawi has the world's fewest doctors, with a ratio of one per every 50,000 people.

## Special Report

strong, proactive Mother's Group—which is, as its name suggests, a group of mothers that take a personal interest in furthering the school's facilities and making sure the needs of the community's children are being met—both male and female students were distinctly more motivated.

In a two-year programme that wrapped in 2009, small stipends were paid directly to teen girls as an incentive to attend school, while some parents also received small payments as further encouragement. The impact was astounding: drop-out rates fell by approximately 40 percent. Another study found that among girls who took part in the programme, the onset of sexual activity and marriage was significantly delayed, and the rate of teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease was reduced.

While it varies from area to area, there is a disparity in teachers in Malawi, with male teachers notably outnumbering female ones. In each of the schools we visited, we were thankful to see at least one (if not more) strong female teacher present;



unsurprisingly, in those schools, the students—both boys and girls—seemed to us to be much more committed to their education. They were distinctly more aware of what it could mean for their future.

As we sat in on a classroom in Chiomba School in the Salima district, their teacher, a man that was small in stature but enormous in his passion for education, asked his students what their rights were. “The right to privacy,” said one boy, standing up confidently. “The right to marry,” said another, as yet another proclaimed his right to be protected by law. After a moment's contemplation, a girl stood up, her chair scraping the floor as she rose



Teachers can have an enormous impact on a Malawian student's future

with a self-assured conviction. “The right to speak,” she said. Even long after we'd shuffled out of the classroom, the girl's words rested heavy on my mind. It was the absence of one word in that common phrase—“free.” While the Constitution of Malawi does state that every person shall have the right to freedom of expression, societal influences can mean that the reality in many villages or homes is quite different. As a relatively outspoken, fiercely independent woman who believes firmly in the importance of equal rights, that one word made all the difference to me. While my

habit of speaking my mind does sometimes land me in trouble, it's something many of us in the developed world take for granted every day. The idea of living in a society so patriarchal that the freedom to be heard isn't necessarily something you can count on was a sobering one. I can only hope that as the positive numbers continue to rise—access to and quality of education facilities are improving, and less students (including girls) are dropping out—in my lifetime, we'll be able to help the children of Malawi unlock the true potential of their future. ■

## GIVING BACK

There's no better time to reach out to those in need than during the season of giving. Financial contributions, while they may seem impersonal, can have an enormous impact on the development of sustainable charitable projects. Donating even Dhs20 a month to a reputable organisation can help to generate a considerable amount of funding. If you'd like to lend a hand and aren't sure where to start, though, there are plenty of causes right here at home that you can get involved in. Here are some to get you started.

### ADOPT A CAMP

Helping to improve the lives of labourers in labour camps for eight years (and counting!), this initiative currently works

with more than 50 camps (that contain more than 52,300 men). Its annual Ramadan initiative sees thousands of care packages (containing toiletries, energy-food items and other specially requested goods) delivered to labour camps across Dubai every year, and volunteers to help assemble the packages are always welcome.

### DUBAI BLOOD DONATION CENTRE

This centre run by the Dubai Health Authority is tasked with ensuring there's enough blood for the city's hospitals—considering how many car crash victims alone this city sees (road traffic accidents suffering from massive blood loss can need transfusions of 50 units of blood or more), and that's not even counting all of the other operations that

may need transfusions, blood is always a much-needed commodity. If you're in good health, weigh at least 50kg and are between the ages of 17 and 65, you're eligible to donate.

### DUBAI FOUNDATION FOR WOMEN AND CHILDREN

Offering protection and support for women and children who have been victims of domestic violence, child abuse and human trafficking, the DFWAC welcomes professional volunteers, sponsorship from both corporate and individual donors, and donations of new items for women and children.

### VOLUNTEER IN UAE

With regular Sunday events for children with special needs taking place all over Dubai, from skiing and cinema days

to waterpark visits and more, Volunteer UAE's Funday Sunday could always use a few more helping hands in hosting the events. If you're good with kids, you could help make a real difference to the children's day by donating your time.

### MAJID AL FUTTAIM CHARITY FOUNDATION

Partnering with various local and international charity foundations, the Majid Al Futtaim Charity Foundation is currently focused on providing high-impact and sustainable assistance in healthcare, education and training, and direct contributions to aid in the overall welfare of the UAE and its people. You can help make a difference by giving your time to work with them on some of their projects.