

## Ending Child Marriage in Malawi



Malawian girl leaders developing advocacy strategies to end child marriage

*"In partnership with Rise Up, we are empowering girls to raise their voices and advocate for their rights. The girls are educating village leaders and successfully advocating for laws that bring an end to child marriage and other harmful traditional practices."*

**- Faith Phiri, GENET Executive Director**

### ABOUT RISE UP

Rise Up advances health, education and equity for girls, youth, and women everywhere. Since 2009, Rise Up's global network has successfully advocated for over 100 laws and policies impacting 115 million girls, youth, and women. We invest in visionary leaders, local organizations, and innovative solutions to achieve large scale change through leadership development, advocacy, funding, and storytelling. Rise Up unifies the power of **Let Girls Lead**, **Champions for Change** and the **Youth Champions Initiative** to create a better future for girls, youth, and women in Africa, Central America, South Asia and the United States.

### Overview

This case study examines how Rise Up is bringing an end to child marriage in Malawi. Rise Up has partnered with the **Girls' Empowerment Network** of Malawi to mobilize hundreds of girl leaders to raise their voices and advocate for landmark legislation outlawing child marriage nationally. With funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Rise Up is now launching ENGAGE – Enabling Girls to Advance Gender Equity – to scale up and evaluate the impacts of this path breaking work in partnership with First Lady Michelle Obama's **Let Girls Learn** Initiative.

### The Crisis of Child Marriage in Malawi

In Malawi, child marriage is a widespread problem – nearly 50% of girls are married by age 18. Rates of child marriage in rural regions average 44%, where girls may be married off as early as age 10 or 11<sup>1</sup>. Child marriage prevents girls from finishing school, and often leads to early pregnancy, exposure to HIV/AIDS, and high risk of maternal mortality. Child marriage rates are far higher in rural areas than in cities, as villages more commonly adhere to traditional practices including early marriage and sexual initiation rites.

### A Girl-Led Approach to Ending Child Marriage

Beginning in 2010, Rise Up partnered with the Girls Empowerment Network (GENET) to launch a girls' empowerment initiative in southern Malawi. Rise Up and GENET's Stop Child Marriage program empowered girls to work collectively to end child marriage in their communities. This innovative program enabled 200 girls aged 10-18 to strengthen their leadership, advocacy, and public speaking

1. UNICEF. (2014). At a Glance: Malawi. Retrieved October 14, 2016, from UNICEF: [http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/malawi\\_statistics.html](http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/malawi_statistics.html)



*“As a typical girl in Chitera, my ambitions were low. I did not work that hard in school because there was no certain future built on the foundation of education. I looked forward to my initiation day and to eventually getting married. But having gone through GENET training sessions, this perception has changed. I became motivated. I developed confidence in myself. I wanted to take action.”*

**- Thokozani Kazembe,  
Girl Program Participant**



skills and mobilize chiefs, Traditional Authorities<sup>2</sup>, and the media to fight child marriage. GENET and Rise Up organized girl-led dialogues with local decision makers and national lawmakers, and developed an alliance with a female Head Chief. The girl leaders worked with the Head Chief and a group of village chiefs under her authority to develop local bylaws that prohibit child marriage and penalize men who engage in the practice. As a result, the traditional authorities increased the legal age of marriage to 21 years in their villages, and instigated penalties for men who marry underage girls, including significant fines paid in goats, chickens, and land. Each village established a taskforce to monitor and enforce implementation of these new bylaws, leading to the unprecedented near elimination of child marriage in these communities.

As a result of the Stop Child Marriage project, chiefs from over 60 villages have ratified bylaws that protect thousands of girls from early marriage. The UN Foundation’s external evaluation demonstrates that this innovative campaign has sharply decreased the incidence of early marriage and increased girls’ school enrollment rates<sup>3</sup> in Malawi. Further, the Stop Child Marriage program has also impacted social norms related to child marriage – although child marriage was originally considered a desirable arrangement generating social and material gain, the external evaluation demonstrates that community members now agree to the importance of girls’ education and view child marriage as shameful. Beyond achieving concrete impacts for Malawian girls, this innovative model has focused national and global media attention on the disastrous social, economic, and health impacts of child marriage for girls and their communities.

### **A National Ban on Child Marriage**

While the girl activists mobilized at the grassroots level to end child marriage, Rise Up’s network of Malawian civil society leaders launched a national campaign to outlaw child marriage. Following five years of targeted policy advocacy, Malawi’s Parliament passed the Marriage, Divorce and Family Relations Bill. This landmark legislation outlaws child marriage and increases the national age of marriage from 15 to 18 years.

Since the law was passed in 2015, Rise Up leaders have been mobilizing to ensure successful implementation of the new legislation. One key component of this strategy is effectively engaging village chiefs as allies. Village chiefs retain almost total control over the norms and practices that directly affect girls in their communities, and therefore are key to ending child marriage. Village chiefs decide which laws and norms are enforced, independent of national legal precedents. Therefore, Rise Up leaders are working closely with village chiefs to eradicate child marriage so that Malawi’s new national law can achieve its full positive impact for girls.

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2. Malawi’s 28 districts are subdivided into Traditional Authorities (TAs), presided over by chiefs. The term “Traditional Authority” refers both to an administrative area and to the chief in charge of it.

3. More details about about the UN Foundation’s independent evaluation are available here: [riseuptogether.org/resources](http://riseuptogether.org/resources)

## Scaling Up

Rise Up is scaling up this important work to end child marriage and collaborating with First Lady Michelle Obama’s Let Girls Learn Initiative to launch ENGAGE – Enabling Girls to Advance Gender Equity. ENGAGE is an evidence-based program funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation that seeks to address the complex needs of vulnerable adolescent girls in Malawi. Rise Up will invest in visionary Malawian leaders advocating to reduce child marriage, and partner with the Girls’ Empowerment Network to strengthen adolescent girls’ leadership, help them stay in school and delay marriage. This innovative approach integrates an SMS and mass radio campaign led by [Youth Tech Health](#) and a rigorous external evaluation led by the [International Center for Research on Women](#).



Memory Banda, Malawian Girl Leader and Rise Up Advisory Board Member

## Rise Up’s Impacts in Malawi

Results from Rise Up’s impact evaluation demonstrate the following achievements since 2009:



Rise Up advances health, education, and equity for girls, youth, & women everywhere. Rise Up’s global network has advocated for laws and policies impacting 115 million people. In Malawi, our work includes:

**60** IN-COUNTRY LEADERS

**11** LAWS & POLICIES PASSED & IMPLEMENTED SINCE 2009, INCLUDING:

NATIONAL MARRIAGE ACT OUTLAWING CHILD MARRIAGE 

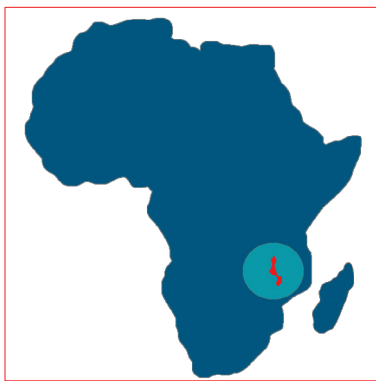
HIV POLICY 

GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN’S EMPOWERMENT ACT 

TRAFFIC IN PERSONS ACT 



**21** GRANTS ACROSS MALAWI



**\$194,000**  
IN CATALYTIC FUNDING INVESTED IN

GIRLS’ RIGHTS  
ENDING CHILD MARRIAGE & HARMFUL PRACTICES  
ADVANCING EDUCATION  
IMPROVING REPRODUCTIVE AND SEXUAL HEALTH

IMPACTING **6.56** MILLION PEOPLE

-  2.05 MILLION GIRLS
-  3.03 MILLION YOUTH
-  1.48 MILLION WOMEN

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[riseuptogether.org](http://riseuptogether.org)  
[blog.riseuptogether.org](http://blog.riseuptogether.org)

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