



# Malawi EMPOWER Newsletter



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The Expanding Malawi HIV/AIDS Prevention with Local Organizations Working for an Effective Epidemic Response

Quarterly Newsletter



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## Quick feed

### Malawi EMPOWER releases second edition of Data Bulletin

Malawi EMPOWER released its second edition of Data Bulletin covering the period from October 2020 to March 2021. Through this publication, the project presents different Adolescent Girls and Young Women (AGYW) characteristics and services the project delivered in collaboration with its partners in Zomba and Machinga districts. The publication can be accessed on this link: <https://www.malawiempower.org/data-bulletin/>

## From the desk of the Malawi EMPOWER Chief of Party

Welcome to our second edition of the Expanding Malawi HIV/AIDS Prevention with Local Organizations Working for an Effective Epidemic Response (Malawi EMPOWER) Newsletter. The newsletter strives to keep you updated on how the project is faring on the ground. It covers selected activities implemented from April to June 2021.

Talking about the basics, the five-year Malawi EMPOWER project took off on 5<sup>th</sup> of March 2020 by a consortium of three partners led by Family Health International 360 (FHI 360) Malawi. The other partners are Christian Health Association of Malawi (CHAM) and Pakachere Institute for Health and Development Communication (Pakachere). The project is being implemented in Zomba and Machinga districts to support the Government of Malawi (GoM)'s commitment to epidemic control by stopping HIV transmission and preventing new HIV infections among Adolescent Girls and Young Women (AGYW) of 10–24 years of age.

With financial support from PEPFAR and USAID, we are doing business unusual in promoting HIV prevention and ensuring substantial access to AGYW with standardized SRH/HIV evidence based. From April to June 2021, we continued to collaborate with DREAMS community partners, and GoM stakeholders to improve SRH and HIV outcomes across the two implementing districts. For example, through the collaboration, we distributed a total of 3,654 HIV self-test kits to a total of 3,588 AGYW during the three months.

We also reached 14,917 active DREAMS beneficiaries with intended layered services/interventions to ensure that they remain HIV-free. To further accelerate HIV prevention efforts, we distributed a total of 65,606



*Dr. Boniface Maket, Malawi EMPOWER Chief of Party*

condoms to a total of 3,135 AGYW in DREAMS clubs, across outreach clinics in the two districts of implementation.

Let me sign out by acknowledging the seamless and consistent financial support we receive from our partners PEPFAR and USAID, and the technical support from the GoM stakeholders. To our implementing colleagues, thank you for the tireless support and unparalleled collaboration you have rendered to the project. Finally, a token of appreciation goes to my colleagues at Malawi EMPOWER for the hard work and teamwork.

To you our reader, we value your support and please give us feedback on this edition, so we improve in the next publication of July-September 2021. Send your feedback to our Communications Specialist Chikondi Lunduka through [clunduka@fhi360.org](mailto:clunduka@fhi360.org). Enjoy the reading!

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Boniface Maket', written over a horizontal line.

**Dr. Boniface Maket**

## Expanded access to PrEP contributes to HIV prevention among girls and young women in Zomba and Machinga

The Malawi EMPOWER is intensifying efforts to get the HIV prevention pill – Pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) - into the hands of adolescent girls and young women (AGYW) who are at risk of getting the infection - in Zomba and Machinga districts.

The project through its outreach clinics, has been providing PrEP information as well as screening of AGYWs (15 to 24 years) enrolled in DREAMS Clubs. The AGYW identified to be at risk of HIV infection are referred to designated health facilities, co-located with the Malawi EMPOWER project, for PrEP initiation.

Angela (not real name) is one of the AGYW enrolled in DREAMS Clubs who - through Tiyamike DREAMS Club - was once referred to Likangala Health Facility in Zomba for PrEP initiation in November 2020. Angela, 22, is HIV negative and has a sexual partner who has multiple partners but always refuses to use condoms during sexual intercourse. In addition, her partner refuses to go for an HIV test.

“I accept to have unprotected sex with him because I do not want to lose him. However, the fact that he has multiple partners used to trouble my heart as I feared contracting HIV,” she confesses.

Following the PrEP initiation, Angela says she now has peace of mind because PrEP would help her prevent contracting HIV and at the same time, she will secure

her relationship. She feels PrEP is her best chance at staying HIV negative.

“It’s so frustrating when a man doesn’t want to use a condom. Now when he refuses, we obviously don’t use protection, but I no longer panic because I know PrEP will control the HIV risk. “I will continue using PrEP until my partner changes his behavior and accepts to go for an HIV test,” she says. “You can never be too sure or too safe.”

To avoid getting unwanted pregnancy, Angela accesses family planning services which are among the integrated Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) services provided EMPOWER with support from the Ministry of Health through AGYW Outreach Clinics.

According to Shira Gavina who is the DREAMS Club facilitator for Tiyamike Club, Angela is one of the first 14 young women who got a referral for PrEP initiation from Tiyamike Club. Shira says the integrated SRH services that Malawi EMPOWER Provides to the AGYW have played a very critical role in preventing them from getting unwanted pregnancies and contracting HIV as well as sexually transmitted infections.



Angela meeting a service provider



Angela interacting with a DREAMS Club facilitator

From page 3

## PrEP contributing to HIV prevention

“The benefits will definitely contribute to shaping a very good future that would see them achieve their goals,” she says.

The Project’s goal is to support the Malawi Government’s commitment to epidemic control by reducing HIV transmission and preventing new HIV infections among adolescent girls and young women (10–24 years of age) in Zomba and Machinga districts towards achieving the UNAIDS 95-95-95 goals by 2030.



Angela visiting a health facility to access SRH services

## Malawi EMPOWER presents paper at 2021 DHIS2 Annual Conference

Malawi EMPOWER presented a paper titled “**Optimizing digital data collection using DHIS2 in Adolescent Girls and Young Women (AGYW) programming: Malawi EMPOWER Experience**” at the 2021 DHIS2 Annual Conference held in Nairobi, Kenya. The conference was held virtually on 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2021 due to COVID-19 travel restrictions. Through the paper, the project provided evidence that use of DHIS2 tracker and app for longitudinal data collection involving community outreach programs with large number of beneficiaries ensures data is collected and captured at different delivery points, times and merged instantly to inform programming, through real-time analytics within the platform; and it is cost effective and scalable.

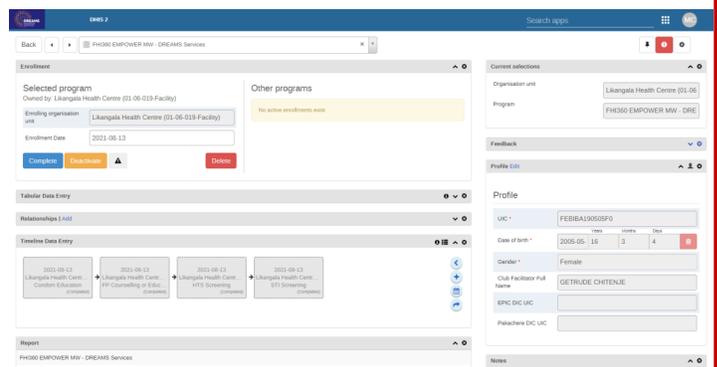
The evidence was drawn after Malawi EMPOWER - in June 2020 - developed a database using DHIS2 tracker version 2.33.8 to capture longitudinal data for SRH/HIV services provided to AGYW during monthly community outreach. Using the DHIS2 tracker, Malawi EMPOWER collected data at multiple outreach sites. Additionally, the project established that DHIS2 tracker allows instant merging of longitudinal records unlike other routine statistical software packages where the process took more than a week to complete. Malawi EMPOWER can now track HIV services among AGYW over-time to determine impact of its

interventions.

Making the presentation on behalf of the project, Malawi EMPOWER Senior Technical Advisor for Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning, Nennie Lungu testified that by using the DHIS2 tracker, the project has saved over \$10,000 through purchasing tablets instead of computers as were previously required.

“The tracker also enabled the project to efficiently develop analytical dashboards to track performance which is key to improving programming.” He said.

Currently, the tracker is deployed to capture individual level data at 40 community outreach sites for more than 40,000 AGYW monthly.



A snapshot of a database developed by Malawi EMPOWER

## Living proof: provision of HIV services turns around life of Monica

In September 2020, 14-year-old Monica Valani (not real name) from Ivala Village, Traditional Authority Chikweo in Machinga District, developed a terrible cough, pain deep in her chest and rash all over her body. The pain got worse until Monica was no longer able to go to school. Her parents tried their best to see her fine by buying her different medicines and various remedies, but nothing helped.

On 24 November 2020, Monica's mother – Chrissy - came across Malawi EMPOWER Outreach Clinic Team and Ministry of Health (MoH) staff from Chikweo Health Centre setting up an outreach clinic offering SRH and HIV services, including gender-based violence case management.

Chrissy explained her daughter's condition to the clinical service delivery team members who advised her to bring Monica for HIV screening. When Chrissy asked Monica to meet the service delivery team, she did not hesitate because she had heard about outreach mobile clinic before from the DREAMS Club where she is a member.

"I had heard that Malawi EMPOWER provides HIV testing services to those that seek such services. I felt I needed to check my HIV status because of the pain I was feeling," Monica narrates.

Late in the afternoon, Chrissy came with Monica to the outreach centre. After being registered and screened by a service provider, Monica was then tested for HIV. Monica tested positive for HIV. Upon her diagnosis, she was counselled and enrolled in treatment. Monica was given a daily regimen of antiretroviral drugs she would

need to strictly adhere for the rest of her life.

"I was without hope," she remembers. "I thought that I would die very soon from HIV."

Malawi EMPOWER team also counselled Monica's mother to take good care of the daughter and encourage her to adhere to treatment. A few weeks later, the Malawi EMPOWER team visited Monica to check how she was doing. They found out that Monica started feeling stronger a few weeks into treatment, and gradually started going to school again.

"My mother has always been there for me and ensures I'm taking the medication. "Monica recounts, gratefully. "This helps me remember to keep taking the



*Monica now feels better.*

medication, even after I started to feel better. She encouraged me to stay hopeful and told me that I was going to live."

Monica has learned a lot about HIV prevention, treatment, and positive living through her experience. "I will encourage my friends to get tested for HIV, so they know their status and live a healthy life," she says.

**"My mother has always been there for me and ensures I'm taking the medication. This helps me remember to keep taking the medication, even after I started to feel better."**

## Project and Youth Advisory Groups drilled on their roles

The Malawi EMPOWER Project Advisory Group (PAG) and Youth Advisory Group (YAG) can now carry out their strategic advisory and program quality assurance roles effectively following an orientation they attended from 17<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> June 2021 in Machinga.

Malawi EMPOWER established PAG to review project performance, receive key stakeholder feedback and guide the strategic direction of the project and course correction if needed. Similarly, YAG was put in place to provide oversight to the project from the perspective of young people by identifying gaps or barriers in the targeted districts and develop workable solutions to ensure provision of comprehensive youth friendly health services targeting young people including AGYW.

PAG members orientation was done back-to-back with YAG members orientation.



*PAG members pose for a group photograph with facilitators after the orientation in Liwonde, Machinga.*

The orientation for PAG mainly intended to strengthen the capacity of the group to provide technical guidance in the planning, implementation and quality assurance of the Malawi EMPOWER AGYW component; create a representative forum for consensus building and support for decisions relating to Malawi EMPOWER;

and discuss the project's concept on AGYW component, approaches, targets and coverage.



*A group photograph of YAG members and their training facilitators in Liwonde, Machinga.*

On the other hand, YAG orientation provided a platform for the members to identify issues/barriers to accessing comprehensive YFHS in Zomba and Machinga; share experience on emerging trends and issues affecting service accessibility to AGYW and young people; recommend collaborative solutions to address challenges young people face in accessing YFHS; create a platform in facilitating meaningful engagement of young people in Malawi EMPOWER project activities in the two implementing districts; and discuss innovative ways of thinking to inform policy, planning and practice regarding YFHS.

**“The orientation will enable PAG and YAG members to carry out their strategic advisory and program quality assurance roles effectively.”**

## Creating safe space for adolescent girls and young women through implementation of gender strategy

The Malawi EMPOWER has developed a Gender Strategy which will drive the project's commitment to ensure that all gender integration activities occur as part of achieving outcomes across the HIV prevention, GBV prevention and management to achieve comprehensive epidemic response.

"This is a significant milestone for the Malawi EMPOWER as it will guide our interventions on meaningful engagement of AGYW, women and men to ensure that the project is implemented in a way that meets and reflects their needs, is responsive to their experiences, and builds on their know-how," says Malawi EMPOWER Chief of Party, Dr. Boniface Maket.

The strategy seeks to address health challenges faced by adolescent girls and young women which are exacerbated by their relative lack of power, opportunity, and resources as well as their increased risk for violence, even when compared to their older female counterparts. In addition, the strategy will contribute to improved AGYW's access to comprehensive SRH education and youth-friendly services, as it will address the structural issues that increase the AGYW's vulnerability and keep them from seeking health services.

Chifundo of Ngokwe Village, Traditional Authority Ntaja, Machinga is one of the AGYWs who has benefitted from implementation of the strategy. Chifundo, aged 16, was raped by her uncle who was staying with them at her parents' place. Although she reported the case to her mother, it died a natural death as she neither took it further nor reported it due to lack of awareness on the available reporting structures.

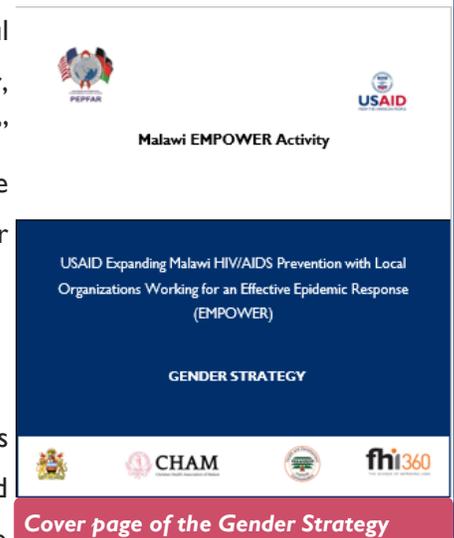
"I experienced sleeping difficulties, sometimes poor appetite, painful flashbacks, anger, shame, and denial," she sobs as she shares her aftermath experience.

Although Chifundo's case was never reported and believed to have

died a natural death she has refused to stay silent. Chifundo was enrolled into AGYW DREAMS club managed by the DREAMS Community Partner Ana Patsogolo (APA). After attending a series of sessions through the club, Chifundo was referred to Malawi EMPOWER Project to access SRH/HIV and GBV services. It is during this encounter with Malawi EMPOWER that she was identified as a survivor of violence after a screening and counselling process which resulted in her opening up on her experience with violence.

Chifundo is now a Malawi EMPOWER AGYW DREAMS Ambassador championing change and reporting on GBV. She is a role model amongst the AGYW in her community and of late she has been able to refer 3 girls to Malawi EMPOWER for further screening for GBV. Two of the girls experienced emotional violence and were referred for psychosocial support.

To help more AGYW like Chifundo, Malawi EMPOWER conducts group sessions with AGYW to discuss the types of violence, reporting and violence prevention tips.



Cover page of the Gender Strategy

# Real-time data dashboard crucial for efficiency in reporting



*The interactive dashboard tracks project performance on service delivery and service quality indicators for efficiency in reporting.*

The Malawi EMPOWER has developed an interactive, web-based dashboard that tracks real-time data on SRH and HIV service delivery to facilitate efficiency in reporting.

Linked to the DREAMS database, the dashboard has been created to offer implementing partners, stakeholders, and the Ministry of Health a user-friendly tool to track how the project is performing on SRH/HIV service delivery.

The dashboard has been designed in a way that it is able to track performance on key indicators both at district and facility level, enabling the project to monitor performance in real time using the interactive visuals.

“Previously, it was time consuming to perform data analytics, develop visuals like charts and graphs, and conduct granular site level analysis for all health facilities working with the project in Zomba and Machinga,” says Malawi EMPOWER Senior Technical Advisor for Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning, Nennie Lungu.

“Additionally, we required services of a skilled M&E personnel every time the project needed to perform data analytics and produce visuals.”

Now, the time it takes to perform the data analytics has been drastically reduced as the dashboard has embedded auto-calculations for most analytics. Thus, one is also able to perform granular site level analysis at a twinkling of an eye through the drag and drop menus.

“All project staff can conduct the analytics using the dashboard as its quite interactive with drag and drop menus. The staff can be able to track project performance in real time, at any place and time of their

convenience as the data is stored in the clouds, “explains Lungu.



*“The dashboard is very efficient.” - Lungu*

Meanwhile, the Malawi EMPOWER staff have been oriented on utilizing and navigating around the dashboard. Given the effectiveness and efficiency of the dashboard in monitoring and evaluation, the project will maintain the tool throughout the entirety of the project implementation.

The Expanding Malawi HIV/AIDS Prevention with Local Organizations Working for an Effective Epidemic Response (EMPOWER) -DREAMS AGYW Services and Case Finding Component project is a five-year (March 5, 2020 to March 4, 2025) Cooperative Agreement between the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and Family Health International (FHI 360). The EMPOWER Activity is implemented by FHI 360 in collaboration with Pakachere Institute for Health and Development Communication (PIHDC) and Christian Health Association of Malawi (CHAM) in supporting Malawi government. *This publication does not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the US Government.*

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