



Malawi EMPOWER

Newsletter



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

Quarterly Newsletter



Financial year 2022— Quarter 2



Malawi EMPOWER Project



@EMPOWERMalawi1

Introduction

The Malawi EMPOWER is glad to release the fifth issue of its newsletter. The newsletter provides you with the latest updated information about the project's activities and impact of its interventions. Stories captured in this issue include:

- ⇒ Malawi EMPOWER's service delivery approach impresses FHI 360 ESARO Director
- ⇒ Malawi MPOWER continues to excel in quality assurance exercise
- ⇒ Routine Data Quality Assessments key for strengthening data management and reporting system
- ⇒ PAG and YAG review Malawi EMPOWER's performance
- ⇒ Use of edutainment to reach communities with COVID-19 vaccination messaging
- ⇒ **Stories of Impact;**
 - ◆ Use of PrEP restores hope for a bright future of an adolescent girl in Zomba
 - ◆ Managing HIV infection in a discordant couple –case of a young woman in Zomba
 - ◆ The positive contribution of YCBDAs towards AGYW's access to sexual and reproductive health services
- ⇒ AGYW Secretariat commends Malawi EMPOWER's data management system

We welcome your feedback on this issue. Please send the feedback to CLunduka@fhi360.org.

Enjoy the reading!



A young woman gets an HIV test in Machinga.

Malawi EMPOWER's service delivery approach impresses FHI 360 ESARO Director



Malawi EMPOWER Service Delivery Coordinator, Patricia Magombo, briefs Dr. Otto on EMPOWER's service delivery approach

The East and Southern Africa Regional Office (ESARO) Director for FHI 360, Dr. Otto Chabikuli, says he is impressed with the project's comprehensive and well-rounded approach. Dr. Otto made the remarks when he visited one of the Malawi EMPOWER's service delivery sites in Machinga on 13th January 2022 to appreciate EMPOWER's provision of HIV prevention and SRH services to Adolescent Girls and Young Women (AGYW) in DREAMS clubs.

"The project's embeddedness in the community is very impressive as it translates into the community's ownership of the project. In addition. It is very exciting to learn that the project brought together different partners who understand and respect local customs as well as needs of the AGYW. This approach is key in ensuring the needs of the targeted beneficiaries are met," he said.

He also commended the project for being flexible in changing its design to accommodate covid-19 interventions when the need arose, as well as putting the Ministry of Health (MoH) officials in front.

"Putting the MoH staff in front will help in ensuring that the project's interventions are sustained because the staff understand that whatever the project is doing including the data belong to the Malawi Government," said Dr. Otto.

Furthermore, Dr. Otto applauded Malawi EMPOWER for incorporating digital technology into its program to ensure data is quickly accessible. Detailed remarks of Dr. Otto can be accessed on this [link: https://www.malawiempower.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/ESARO_Director's_Visit_to_Malawi_EMPOWER.mp4](https://www.malawiempower.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/ESARO_Director's_Visit_to_Malawi_EMPOWER.mp4)

Malawi MPOWER continues to excel in quality assurance exercise



A snapshot of SIMS session at Chamba Health Centre in Machinga

The Malawi EMPOWER continues to excel in Site Improvement through Monitoring Systems (SIMS) exercise as it meets almost all the required standards of SIMS assessment. This was observed during the follow-on SIMS sessions conducted in Machinga and Zomba districts on 7th March 2022 and 8th March 2022, respectively. The follow-on SIMS sessions aimed at determining whether the four Core Essential Elements (CEEs) which got low scores from the first SIMS conducted by USAID in November 2021 had improved.

“The follow-on SIMS covered all the CEEs, although we paid much attention on the four CEEs that had gaps during previous assessment. I’m happy to report that the results met the required standards of the assessed CEEs,” said Malawi EMPOWER Senior Technical Advisor

for Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning, Nennie Lungu.

SIMS is a quality assurance methodology used to increase the impact of PEPFAR programs on the HIV epidemic through standardized monitoring of the quality of services at the site. Generally, SIMS aims to systematize and broaden ongoing PEPFAR site monitoring processes and improve documentation through administration of standard tools that assess adherence to PEPFAR standards of care and service delivery, as well as within entities that support and guide service delivery.



SIMS in progress at Matawale Health Centre in Zomba.

Routine data quality assessments key for strengthening data management and reporting system



RDQA in progress in Zomba

As part of strengthening its data management and reporting system, Malawi EMPOWER's Strategic Information (SI) unit conducted Routine Data Quality Assessments (RDQAs) at randomly selected sites across the two implementing districts from 23rd to 31st March 2022. The assessment focused on the January - March 2022 reporting period (Financial Year 2022 -Quarter 2).

“All collected and reported data for the review period was assessed to determine whether it was fit for the Financial Year 2022—Quarter 2 reporting purposes, identify potential quality issues and their causes, and developed action plans to address any identified problems for the two Local Implementing Partners (CHAM and Pakachere),” explains Malawi EMPOWER Senior Technical Advisor for Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning, Nennie Lungu.

During the activity, the RDQA teams assessed the SI system that produces the data and verified the quantity and quality of the reported data. The tools used to conduct the RDQAs included the FHI 360 M&E System Assessment Tool and the Data Verification Improvement Tool Version 2.0 - all Microsoft Excel-based formats. Additionally, the project administered the non-disclosure and beneficiaries (signed by the DREAMS Facilitators on behalf of AGYW) consent forms.

At the end of the assessments, all corrective measures were made with the proper action plans for strengthening the data management and reporting system for each implementing partner to address. It was evident from the RDQAs findings that data discrepancies varied from partner to partner, and in some cases from indicator to indicator.

PAG and YAG review Malawi EMPOWER's performance

Malawi EMPOWER organized a review meeting for its Project Advisory Group (PAG) and Youth Advisory Group (YAG) to review the project's performance and provide key stakeholder feedback to guide the strategic direction of the project. The YAG review meeting was conducted back-to-back with the PAG review meeting on 29th March 2022 and 30th March 2022, in Zomba.

On top of reviewing the project's performance, YAG developed workable solutions for identified gaps to ensure provision of comprehensive youth friendly health services targeting AGYW. The review meetings featured presentations on EMPOWER Activity's qualitative progress; achievements; Local Implementing Partners' capacity strengthening; walk through on EMPOWER web portal; and a review of YAG terms of reference.

Malawi EMPOWER established the PAG so it can guide the strategic direction of the project and course correction if needed.

To provide oversight to the project from the perspective of young people, YAG is very crucial for the Malawi EMPOWER Project in 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. This is in line with the project's commitment to purposeful and meaningful inclusion of AGYW.



Zomba District Youth Officer, Kate Mwandira, stresses a point during the YAG review meeting

Use of edutainment to reach communities with COVID-19 vaccination messaging

Malawi EMPOWER in collaboration with District Health Offices of Machinga and Zomba have been implementing evidence-based health promotion activities embedding education information on COVID-19 vaccination. The activities include role plays and theater performances.

“Information is tailored to address myths and fears that communities have around COVID-19 vaccination and we encourage individuals to access the vaccine in strategic sites. The activities encourage interactions with the community members to deeply understand the benefits of accessing vaccination,” explains Malawi EMPOWER Senior Technical Officer for Social Behaviour Change and Communication, Patrick Gwaza.

Over 6000 individuals were reached with COVID-19 vaccination messaging between January-March 2022 in Zomba and Machinga districts. Exposure to these activities led to positive changes in knowledge about COVID-19 vaccination, prevention behaviors and attitudes towards



Elizabeth got COVID-19 vaccine following exposure to EMPOWER's information sessions.

accessing the vaccine as about 4000 individuals accessed the vaccine.

Elizabeth Paulo, 28, who hails from Masambuka Village, Traditional Authority Kawinga in Machinga is one of the individuals who got the COVID-19 vaccine in Machinga following the health promotion activities which EMPOWER organized. She says previously, she had been reluctant to get the vaccine because she had heard a lot of negative stories about the vaccine.

“I have heard that when a woman gets the vaccine, she becomes infertile and cannot give birth. But when the team from EMPOWER and Ministry of Health came to our community to teach us about the vaccine and how it works, I realized that what I heard about the vaccine were just myths. I'm glad to report that I got my first dose of the vaccine on 28th February and I will have my second dose on 28th March 2022,” she explains.



EMPOWER staff mentoring MoH counterparts on demand creation for COVID-19 vaccine

Use of PrEP restores hope for a bright future of an adolescent girl in Zomba

Olive Bondo from Ramusi Village, Traditional Authority Mwambo in Zomba District, was in a very stressful situation in May 2021 after her boyfriend infected her with a sexually transmitted infection (STI). Olive, aged 17 years-old, had been engaging in unprotected sex with her boyfriend who refused to use condoms and did not want to go for an HIV test. Olive says she accepted to continue engaging in unprotected sex because she did not want to lose him.

“However, this affected me emotionally as I felt I was at risk of getting HIV, but I decided to continue sleeping with my boyfriend because I did not want him to go to other girls,” she says.

Olive had just finished treatment for the STI when she was enrolled into Chitsanzo DREAMS Club where a DREAMS Facilitator took the club members through so many topics in areas of sexual and reproductive health (SRH), HIV prevention and gender-based violence.

“In June 2021, a team from EMPOWER came to our club to provide different SRH services. Prior to the service provision, they taught us about HIV prevention including use of pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) to prevent HIV. I was convinced to start using PrEP since I knew I was at risk of getting HIV,” she explained.

Olive says, the team conducted an HIV test on her and when she was found HIV negative, the team referred and escorted her to Likangala Health Centre for PrEP initiation. She has been accessing



Olive giving a motivational talk on PrEP to her peers

PrEP continuously without interruption since her initial initiation in June 2021. A Youth Community Based Distribution Agent (YCBDA) escorts her to the health facility every time she wants to get PrEP to ensure she does not miss a refill of the drugs.

Olive is now one of the EMPOWER's PrEP Champions. With the support of the YCBDA and DREAMS Ambassador, she conducts motivational talks to her peers and other clubs on PrEP and other SRH/HIV services.

To avoid unplanned pregnancy, Olive accesses family planning services from EMPOWER. She says she wants to attain tertiary education before she could get pregnant so she can realize her dream of becoming a nurse.

“The stress is now gone because I no longer hold the worries of contracting HIV. I am concentrating fully on my studies and I'm very optimistic I will realise my dream of becoming a nurse,” she says.

Managing HIV infection in a discordant couple –case of a young woman in Zomba

“Without the help of Malawi EMPOWER, I would have been infected with HIV. Malawi EMPOWER came to my rescue by providing me with PrEP information and escorted me to Machinjiri Health Centre which is far away from my house to get PrEP. I would encourage my fellow young women who are at risk of getting HIV to get PrEP. It is possible to remain HIV negative while married to an HIV positive partner,” says Amina.

Amina (not real name) aged 20, is married and has one child. She comes from Matandani village in traditional Authority Malemia in Zomba district. She is a member of Tikondane DREAMS club which she joined in February 2021 when she was 19 years old. Despite being pregnant, Amina continued attending the club sessions.

Two months after she had delivered her baby, Amina attended Malawi EMPOWER’s service delivery outreach clinic at Matandani primary school. She was among the AGYW who received SRH/HIV/GBV services including PrEP information which Malawi EMPOWER provided at the site.



Malawi EMPOWER supports AGYW like these to prevent HIV

“A Malawi EMPOWER outreach service provider asked me if I knew my HIV status. I told her I got an HIV test long time ago as I never attended antenatal clinics when I was pregnant. The provider convinced me to get tested and the results came out negative,” she explains.

Amina says she was not sure of her HIV status because she got impregnated and married with a man whom she did not know his HIV status. After she got her HIV test results, Malawi EMPOWER staff also counselled her on the need for her to get PrEP. She told the staff she needed some time to think about it. In September 2021, her husband became critically ill and was admitted at Zomba Central Hospital. Upon further medical investigations while in hospital, her husband was found HIV positive. This prompted Amina to seek PrEP and she asked her DREAMS club facilitator on the date when Malawi EMPOWER would come again for service provision.

The DREAMS facilitator informed Malawi EMPOWER staff about the issue. The Malawi EMPOWER staff rushed to Amina’s home where they assessed her for HIV and possible PrEP initiation. She tested HIV negative and then she was escorted to Machinjiri Health Centre for further assessment and PrEP initiation. She has been on PrEP for over seven months. She has since been testing for HIV as per medical recommendation and she is still HIV negative. Amina and her husband are an example of a discordant couple .

The positive contribution of YCBDAs towards AGYW's access to sexual and reproductive health services

Patuma James (not real name) has been married to her husband for three years, and the couple has two children. Patuma, aged 22, does not plan to have a third child soon because she needs time to concentrate on the well-being of the two children and farming business. She believes the only way to prevent unplanned pregnancy is through use of family planning methods. Unfortunately, her husband



YCBDA s like these play a big role towards AGYW's access to SRH services

has always been against Patuma's idea of using family planning methods because his wish is to have as many children as possible.

Patuma hails from Traditional Mkoola in Machinga and she is a member of Tadala DREAMS Club. During one of the DREAMS club sessions in January 2022, Patuma met a Youth Community Based Distribution Agent (YCBDA) Marriam James, who had come to the club for social building activities.

"I confided in Marriam that I was stressed out because my husband could not allow me to use family planning methods and that he threatened me to end the marriage if I dared to access family planning services," she explains.

After hearing Patuma's ordeal, Marriam booked an appointment with both Patuma and her husband. She visited the couple and took them through the benefits of family planning. Marriam also appealed to the husband to support Marriam in family planning

issues. During their discussion, the husband admitted that he was wrong in stopping his wife from accessing family planning services. He committed to allow Patuma access and use her desired method of family planning.

Two weeks later, Patuma visited Mpiri site where Malawi EMPOWER had come to provide SRH, HIV and GBV services to AGYW. She was one of the AGYW who had accessed family planning services on this day. She approached Marriam and said, "I'm here to access family planning services since my husband has now given me a go ahead. I have settled for Depo-Provera."

In addition to accessing family planning service, she had a chance to test for HIV. She expressed her excitement to know her HIV status .

Voices from the field



“Malawi EMPOWER has helped me understand what gender-based violence is. Every time I feel like I have suffered violence, I report it to my parents, teachers, and other local authorities, so they intervene as soon as possible.” - Patuma Leonard, Machinga.

“Access to condoms has helped me to protect myself from getting HIV, unplanned pregnancy, and sexually transmitted infections. Thanks to Malawi EMPOWER for ensuring we have easy access to the condoms. I no longer allow my boyfriend to have sex with me without one. I want to avoid STIs and my plan is to have children only after my studies.” – Rute Jonasi, Zomba.



“Being introduced to PrEP has been timely for me! I do not know my boyfriend’s HIV status because he refuses to go for an HIV test and yet he insists on us having unprotected sex.” – Jamila Maness, Machinga.

“I did not feel any pain when I had the HIV self-test. The test uses a swab, making it is less intimidating than being pierced with a syringe. When I told my friends that I did not feel any pain, they also decided to do the HIV self test.” – Falesi Lamusi, Zomba.



AGYW Secretariat commends Malawi EMPOWER's data management system

The National AGYW Coordinator Mr. Mahara Longwe commended the Malawi EMPOWER on the use of digital technology such as DHS2 and Power BI in managing data for the project. He said the use of technology in data management is crucial in implementation of programs as it improves organizational consistency, improves productivity and reliably informs decision making.

Mr. Longwe made the statement when he visited one of the project's implementation sites in Ntaja, Machinga on 8th February 2022, to appreciate the project's interventions.

“Failure to put in place clear systems for data management can put a project at risk of conflicting information and analysis, decreased productivity and missed opportunities. I hereby commend the project for having data management systems in place help in enhancing efficiency of the project,” said Longwe.



EMPOWER staff taking the AGYW Secretariat staff (first two from the right) through the project's approach

Mr. Longwe also met other partners implementing DREAMS/AGYW projects in the two districts and made a recommendation that all the partners implementing DREAMS/AGYW projects should be reporting to the District Youth Office at district level.

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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