



Malawi EMPOWER Activity



March 2023

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

Quarterly Newsletter
6th Issue



Introduction

Dear Reader,

We are delighted to announce the release of the sixth issue of our newsletter. As always, we are committed to keeping you informed about the latest updates on our project and the impact it is making in the lives of AGYW.

In this issue, we are thrilled to inform you about the expansion of our project to Phalombe District, where we are providing standardized evidence-based Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) and HIV integrated services to Adolescent Girls and Young Women (AGYW) aged 10-24 years enrolled in DREAMS clubs. We are excited about this development as it allows us to reach even more young women and positively impact their lives. We are also proud to inform you that we won the Kudos award, a recognition of our hard work and dedication in improving the health and well-being of AGYW. Additionally, we had the pleasure of meeting with FHI 360 Global Technical Director for HIV Programming, Dr. Chris Akolo, who offered us valuable insights and guidance.

Lastly, we invite you to read the section on stories of impact, which features AGYW whose lives have been positively impacted by our project. We hope these stories inspire you as much as they have inspired us. .

Please feel free to contact us if you have questions or ideas on how we can improve the newsletter. Thank you in advance, we look forward to hearing from you. Send the feedback to CLunduka@fhi360.org.

Enjoy the reading!



Adolescent girls of Tiyamike DREAMS club in Phalombe expressing joy after EMPOWER team brought SRH/HIV integrated services to their club

Malawi EMPOWER Expands Access to Quality Health Services for Adolescent Girls and Young Women in Phalombe

Malawi EMPOWER Activity has rolled out provision of SRH and HIV services in Phalombe after the District Executive Committee (DEC) approved the Project to expand its work into the district. In the district, Malawi EMPOWER is working closely with FHI 360's Meeting Targets to Maintain the Epidemic Control (EpiC) and other DREAMS partners, with substantial involvement of the District Health Office to provide standardized evidence based SRH and HIV integrated services through mobile clinical outreach in youth friendly safe spaces to AGYW aged 10-24 years enrolled in DREAMS clubs.

Malawi EMPOWER and EpiC are utilizing experience gained from implementation of activities in the DREAMS operational districts of Zomba and Machinga to effectively roll out interventions in Phalombe. Malawi EMPOWER Chief of Party Dr. Boniface Maket said that the expansion will significantly increase the project's capacity to reach many AGYW with quality SRH and HIV services.

"The expansion of the project is an opportunity for the project to serve even more AGYW with quality SRH and HIV integrated services as we support the Malawi Government in its efforts to eradicate HIV pandemic. I am pleased that Phalombe DEC members support our interventions that will benefit many AGYW in the district," said Dr Maket.



A young woman accessing family planning services at Tiyamike DREAMS club in Phalombe

Phalombe District Medical Officer stated that the coming of Malawi EMPOWER will significantly contribute to the improved

accessibility of SRH services for AGYW. "EMPOWER will support the DHO in areas it was lagging behind. For instance, our wish is to reach out to all corners of Phalombe with quality health services but we are hindered by shortage of resources. We believe EMPOWER and other partners will help us fill those gaps. As the DHO we commit our full support to ensure projects like EMPOWER meet their targets," he explained.

Stella Bonongwe is one of the AGYW who have already accessed EMPOWER's HIV and SRH integrated services at Tadala DREAMS club in Phalombe. She appreciates EMPOWER's efforts to provide SRH and HIV integrated services at her club which is close to her home. "I never thought that access to SRH services would be this easy. It was difficult to go to the health facility to access SRH and HIV services. Despite long distances, we were afraid of meeting people who know us and would be judgmental if they saw us accessing such services," she said.

Malawi EMPOWER is providing SRH and HIV integrated services to AGYW enrolled in DREAMS clubs targeting seven facilities which include Migowi, Nkhulambe, Mkhwayi, Sukasanje, Phalombe, Kalinde and Chitekesa. By collaborating with DREAMS partners and other organizations, Malawi EMPOWER aims to provide a more comprehensive and accessible approach to SRH and HIV services in Phalombe district.

EMPOWERED to Tackle GBV Among AGYW In Phalombe

136 health care workers in Phalombe undergo training of trainers in Gender-Based Violence

Malawi EMPOWER Project on 30th November 2022 awarded 21 health care workers with certificates after completing the training of trainers in Gender-Based Violence (GBV). The training targeted the health care workers (clinicians, HIV Diagnostic Assistants, Nurses) who work with Adolescent Girls and Young Women (AGYW) in Phalombe district on GBV, SRH and HIV. Phalombe became the third district of implementation for the Malawi EMPOWER Project in October 2022 after the District Executive Committee approved it to expand into the district. The other two districts are Zomba and Machinga.

Malawi EMPOWER Chief of Party Dr. Boniface Maket highlighted that the training aimed to enhance capacity of the health care workers in identifying and responding to GBV which affects AGYW; increases their vulnerability to HIV risk; decreases testing uptake and HIV status disclosure, and impacts ART/PREP initiation and adherence.



Mwandida gets her certificate of training

“I would like to urge all of you to demonstrate and put to full use the skills you have acquired, particularly on how to identify, screen and respond to GBV according to the principles of violence prevention and response for you to assist victims of GBV effectively,” he said.

The certificates were handed over to participants by Malawi EMPOWER Chief of Party Dr. Boniface Maket and Phalombe District Medical Officer Dr. Leonard Naphazi. Both Dr. Maket and Dr. Naphazi congratulated the participants upon completing the training successfully.

Dr. Naphazi said that the training was timely since cases of GBV are rampant in the district. He therefore urged all the participants to utilize the skills and knowledge gained from the training to respond to GBV which is a critical barrier to reaching HIV epidemic control.

“If you effectively utilize the knowledge and skills gained during this training, you will surely contribute to the GBV response in the district. I therefore urge you all to take part in this response in order to create safe space for both men and women as well as AGYW,” said Dr. Naphazi.

Speaking on behalf of the participants, Mwandida Matimati thanked Malawi EMPOWER Project for knowledge and skills the participants gained during the three-day training.

“The sessions were so informative and educative. We have been challenged and enlightened to understand our role in responding to GBV against AGYW,” she said.

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Another participant, Mcloud Lysan, said the training enabled him to acquire innovative knowledge and skills in handling GBV survivors using the first-line support— Listen, Inquire, Validate, Enhance safety, and Support (LIVES) model.

“I’m now conversant with the LIVES model which is effective in managing GBV cases. The model entails providing a listening ear to a client; inquiring the needs of a client; validating the information provided by a client; enhance safety of a client; and providing the necessary support to a client. I will surely use this model when assisting the victims of GBV in the district,” he said.

The training was held back-to-back with a similar orientation targeting a total of 115 health surveillance assistants (HAS) and community midwives who interact with AGYW at club and community level. The HSAs play a critical role at the community level in identifying and responding to GBV through their interactions with AGYW.

In its implementation in Phalombe, Malawi EMPOWER is building on the successes registered in Zomba and Machinga to ensure that targeted AGYW have access to high quality SRH/HIV integration services including post GBV clinical and non-clinical services based on the project’s minimum package. The minimum package consists of HTC Screening, GBV screening, STI screening, Risk reduction counselling, PrEP, SRH and condom information.



A snapshot of the training in progress.

Kudos to Malawi EMPOWER Project for excellence

Congratulations
TO THE WINNER

BONIFACE MAKET

and

EMPOWER/MALAWI

To the entire team, for excellent performance on the project and positive donor feedback. Well done in setting the gold standard in comms/visibility efforts, too!

from the FHI 360 / East and Southern Africa Regional Office (ESARO)



Malawi EMPOWER is the first project to win the 'Kudos' award which FHI 360 Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Office (ESARO) introduced in September 2022. The award is meant for any team or individual in the ESA region that has demonstrated exemplary efforts and performance. According to Senior Program Officer backstopping Malawi Country Office and EMPOWER activity, Malebo Sesane, Malawi EMPOWER was nominated for its excellence in program delivery.

Malebo said the EMPOWER Project has been performing very well across many functions including DREAMS and AGYW layered services delivery and strategic information.

"EMPOWER has been recognized for its robust, fragile and real time strategic information system. The project has its own in-house PowerBI dashboard and it is able to make implementation adjustments as well as evidence-based management decisions to ensure that lagging indicators are improved and resources

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are optimized,” she said.

Malebo added that Malawi EMPOWER Project always endeavors to identify and implement innovative initiatives that improve efficiency and reach of services for AGYW.

Malawi EMPOWER Chief of Party Dr. Boniface Maket expressed profound gratitude for the overwhelming recognition.

“We as a team, are indeed humbled, and I hope that this award will spur us to greater performance heights in 2023. To win the inaugural award is indeed special and we thank ESARO team for this nomination and affirmation of the good work the EMPOWER Team has done for the past few years. We are challenged to perform even better in the coming years. I invite other projects to visit our website www.malawiempower.org and learn more about our work and explore some of the products we have in the knowledge management platform,” he said.



Dr. Maket discussing programmatic issues with some of the Malawi EMPOWER staff in Machinga district.

STORIES OF CHANGE—VOICES FROM THE FIELD

Malawi EMPOWER applauded for demonstrating excellence

Malawi EMPOWER Project was applauded for its commitment to provision of quality SRH and HIV integrated services to adolescent girls and young women since the project began in 2020.

FHI 360 Global Technical Director for HIV Programs, Dr. Chris Akolo made the compliment on 22 March 2023, while meeting Malawi EMPOWER staff to appreciate the project's progress.

“ I appreciate all your efforts and I am sure it is the commitment that has contributed to the project's outstanding results. I urge you to continue working hard so you can impact more lives of AGYW,” he said.

Malawi EMPOWER Chief of Party, Dr. Boniface Maket cited various achievements the project made despite implementing the project in a challenging environment.



Dr. Akolo in a meeting with Malawi EMPOWER staff

“The project rolled out in March 2020, soon after the country was declared as a state of national disaster due to COVID-19. The declaration restricted activities in the health and other sectors and this presented seemingly insurmountable start-up challenges, with donor targets unchanged and the government expecting essential HIV services to continue. Recently, some of the project activities were halted due to adverse weather conditions caused by Cyclone Freddy. Despite these challenges, we managed to navigate around these challenging situations and I am happy to report that we have made great strides.” He explained.

Since its inception in 2020, Malawi EMPOWER Project has reached over 141,000 AGYW in DREAMS clubs in Phalombe, Zomba and Machinga districts with standardized SRH/HIV and GBV services through effective strategies such as the extended clinical outreach activities. Over 20,000 AGYW accessed HIV testing services and almost 2,000 AGYW were initiated on PrEP. Additionally, the project has won three awards presented by FHI 360 Global namely: The Game Changer award, Kudos award and Top Gun, for demonstrating excellence in HIV programming. Malawi EMPOWER has also been submitting and presenting abstracts to different conferences such as the DHIS2 annual conference and the 2022 American Public Health Association (APHA) annual conference.

Commemoration of World AIDS Day

On 1st December 2022, Malawi EMPOWER joined the country and entire world in commemorating World AIDS Day 2022 under the theme “Equitable Access to Quality HIV Services for All” at Mpemba Health Centre Ground in Blantyre. The theme sought to highlight ongoing inequalities holding back the end of HIV and AIDS and for countries to address these inequalities.

Malawi EMPOWER displayed a pavilion showcasing how it is supporting the Malawi Government’s efforts in eradicating the epidemic. The pavilion set a stage for the project team and two project beneficiaries to interact with officials from MoH, government officials, UN agencies, development partners and the youth. Officials who visited the pavilion were particularly interested in Malawi EMPOWER’s service delivery model and its collaboration with the Ministry of Health and other clinical partners to reach AGYW with different HIV/SRH services. The project’s participation in the commemoration of World AIDS Day 2022 was an opportunity to showcase its efforts in supporting the Malawi Government's efforts to eradicate the HIV epidemic. The project's comprehensive approach to service delivery, collaboration with the Ministry of Health and other clinical partners and focus on addressing the barriers that prevent AGYW from accessing HIV services make it a critical partner in the fight against HIV and AIDS in Malawi.



EMPOWER Service Delivery Coordinator , Patricia Magombo, taking a participant through the project's service delivery model.

Achieving HIV epidemic control through index testing – story of Peter Nanjiri

Benita (not real name) is a member of Tiyanjane DREAMS Club at Jali in Zomba. She met a health service delivery team from Malawi EMPOWER Project in February 2022 when the team came to the club to provide SRH, HIV and GBV services to the club members. After screening Benita for health-related issues, they encouraged her to get an HIV test immediately. She agreed to get tested and the result came out positive. The team counselled Benita and escorted her to Matiya Health Centre for ART initiation. However, Benita was not comfortable to disclose her HIV status to her husband, Peter, fearing he might leave her. But through her discussion with the Malawi EMPOWER team, Benita gained hope and led the team to her home to meet Peter. Peter was in disbelief when the EMPOWER team broke the news to him. He even refused to get tested when the team asked him to do so.

“I did not want to get tested because I was afraid of being diagnosed HIV positive and the stigma associated with the result. However, after the health workers from Malawi EMPOWER Project and Matiya Health Centre counselled me by taking me through the benefits of knowing one’s HIV status, I accepted to get tested,” explains Peter.

Peter’s HIV test result came out positive. After counselling, the team accompanied Peter to Thondwe Health Centre for ART initiation. “It is now almost a year since my wife, and I have been on ART. We are living a healthy life and I can testify that we are a proof of the benefits of knowing one’s HIV status and effectiveness of the ART. All my fears are gone, and I even encourage my friends to go for HIV testing,” says Peter.

His wife Benita could not hide her excitement that her husband now knows his HIV status and he is taking medication to continue living a healthier life.

“We encourage each other to take the medication as advised by the health workers. We are optimistic we will continue to live a healthy life since we have not faced any health-related problem since we started taking the medication,” she says.

Peter is one of the many people in Zomba and Machinga who have learnt their HIV status through the Malawi EMPOWER’s index testing strategy. Index case testing is done to members of a household, biological children and partners of a person diagnosed with HIV (the index clients).

“Index testing has helped the project to reach out to many people, including men, who usually shun HIV testing services. In 2023, we hope to reach as many people as possible with index testing services as one way of controlling the pandemic,” says EMPOWER Senior Technical Advisor for HIV, Kumbukani Chawinga.

Bringing hope to HIV positive AGYW in Machinga district

Aisha (not real name) is a mother of two based in Chipata village, Traditional Authority Nyambi in Machinga. The 23-year-old woman lives with her children following a divorce with a husband whom she described as unsupportive and a drunkard. The ex-husband moved on and married another wife from another district. Aisha did not know her HIV sero-status until August 2022 when she attended an AGYW outreach mobile clinic conducted by EMPOWER in collaboration with the Ministry of Health (MoH) staff from Nyambi Health Centre. Aisha accessed HIV testing services to which she tested positive. However, Aisha strongly refused to be initiated on ART.

Since then, the project team together with Baylor's HTS providers (EMPOWER's facility partner) had on several occasions counselled her with the motive of influencing her to reverse her decision but the efforts yielded no result. Aisha kept saying "I am not sick, and I do not see the reason for taking medication."

Following a series of follow ups and counselling, Aisha accepted to get initiated on ART. After a month of accessing ART, she said "when I tested HIV positive, I was in great denial. Now I must make peace with it and learn how to live with HIV. Based on the counselling sessions I had with EMPOWER and Baylor,



A health worker at Nyambi Health Centre counseling Aisha during her visit to the facility to access ART.

the medication will help me to continue living a healthy life. I thank the two projects as well as Nyambi Health Centre for being patient and treating me with respect. I now have answers to all the questions I had regarding HIV."

The team also tested Aisha's children for HIV and luckily, they were found HIV negative.



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 (Pakachere) and Christian Health Association of Malawi (CHAM). *This publication does not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the US Government.*

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