

UNTOLD
STORIES

LIFE
AFTER
BACK TO
SCHOOL



CONTENTS

“The life of the girl child who has returned to school after being withdrawn from marriage is often not paid attention to. Most of the times, the investment ends when the girl is back in school.”

4 DAN ODALLO



Message from the UNFPA Representative

6 ALINATE MAGANIZO



Pregnant at 14 and married off into a polygamous marriage

22 FANNY MASEKO



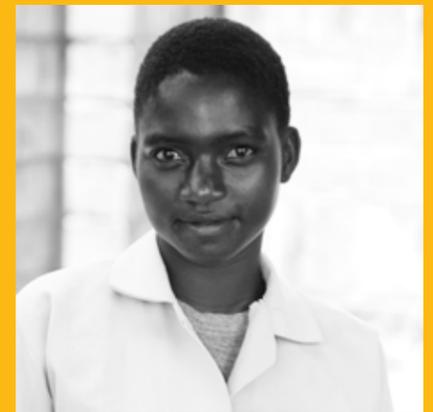
Determined to become a Doctor

26 JOYCE CHIOCHA



Orphaned at an early age, worsened by sexual favours

30 MADALO



Determined to become an engineer despite facing various forms of abuse

10 BEATRICE BANDA



Opted for early marriage because of being an orphan and harsh poverty

14 BERTHA JOSEPH



Impoverishment, complications giving birth but back in a classroom with dreams to become a Nurse

18 DORAH NZIMA



Married off at 14 years to a fellow teenager of 18 years

34 MARIA



One of eight children from elderly parents

38 PATRICIA TOBIAS



A case of perseverance stemming from forced child marriage

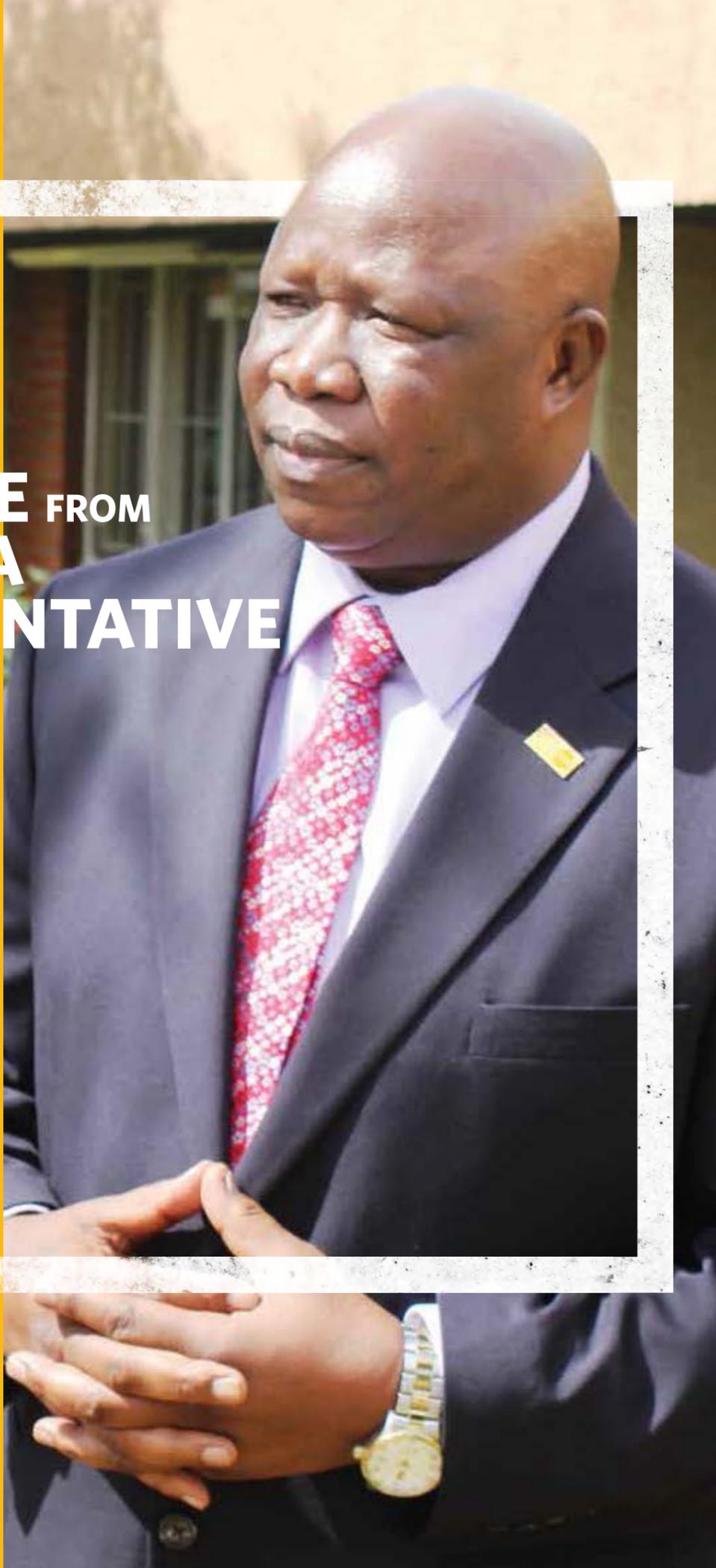
42 VICTORIA



Married as a child in the hope of improving her life

MESSAGE FROM THE UNFPA REPRESENTATIVE

Dan Odallo



Child marriage is a human rights violation. Despite laws against it, the practice remains widespread, in part because of persistent poverty and gender inequality.

Child marriage threatens girls' lives and health, and it limits their future prospects. Girls who are forced into child marriage often become pregnant while still adolescents, increasing the risk of complications in pregnancy and childbirth. These complications are a leading cause of sickness and death among adolescents in developing countries including Malawi.

UNFPA promotes programmes on ending child marriages and as a result, many young girls, who otherwise would be in tortuous marriages, have returned to school.

However, the life of the girl child who has returned to school after being withdrawn from marriage is often not glamorous. The struggle does not end after the withdraw from the marriage. Many of these girls have one or two children at home and the underlying factors that contributed to the early marriage often remain unresolved.

Every day, they struggle to fend for their children and themselves, let alone the demands of school.

At school, their integration with continuing students remains a challenge.

At home, the community is ambivalent and sceptical of their desire to remain in school and redefine their future due to the prevailing perception that marriage is a better option for a girl child.

Therefore, UNFPA Malawi country office, in March 2017, embarked on an ambitious project to document a sample of 50 girls in Dedza District from Traditional Authority of Chief Kachindamoto, with the objective of documenting their day-to-day struggles as they embark the journey back to school.

It is encouraging to see that, despite their daily struggles, the desire to remain in school is still strong and each one of them has a vision.

In this booklet, we provide a detailed account of the real-life situations of ten selected and present their lives after marriage. In addition to the stories, the 15-minute DVD attached provides a visual record of the same.

With these stories, we call

upon the Government and all those concerned to seriously look beyond taking girls back in school. There is need for a continuum of investment in the campaign to end child marriages in Malawi.

At UNFPA, we commit our continuous efforts and that we will not stop until every woman and every girl child is empowered and is able to realize her full potential regardless of where she is born. If we change their lives, we can change the nation.

Enjoy the reading and contact UNFPA Malawi office for further information and other desired actions.

A

Alinate

Pregnant at 14 and married off into a polygamous marriage.

Alinate Maganizo joined in a polygamous marriage at the age of 14 years, while waiting for her standard eight examination results in 2014. She and her parents thought this was a reasonable decision, in an attempt to address their daily struggles. Not only did she choose marriage to relieve the family's poverty, but also she was facing another challenge - she was pregnant.



Back to school but daily challenges linger

My parents did not reprimand me when I got married early because they felt (it) would lift a burden off their lives. So they simply supported my decision," she said

Alinate was born in the Mchinji District but her family moved to the district of Dedza where they settled. "We are five children in our family and I am the first born. I live with my parents (apart from the time she was married); both of them are not employed and we survive on limited subsistence farming," she said.

■ LIFE IN A POLYGAMOUS MARRIAGE

Although it was Alinate's decision to get married, it still caught her by surprise. She discovered the union was polygamous and she, the second wife. Her husband had continued the relationship with his first wife.

"Sometimes my husband would go and live with other woman for a month, which made me question my marriage," she said.

Alinate was not sure how old the man was, but he had mentioned that he was born in the 1980s – placing him at 20 to 30 years older than her.

Throughout her marriage, she faced economic, verbal and physical abuse from her husband, a nightmarish scenario that she endured for nearly two years.

■ COMMUNITY ACTION TO END CHILD MARRIAGE – CHIEF KACHINDAMOTO'S INITIATIVE

"During my marriage, I heard about Chief Kachindamoto ending child marriages in Dedza. But I did not know how to reach out to her," she said.

Eventually Alinate was identified by a mothers' group* as a girl who needed support – and to return to school, because of her tender age. Esther Ntandasha from the local Mother Group*, which included Senior Chief Kachindamoto, met Alinate in person and spoke to her about leaving her marriage and returning to school.

"I opened up to them about the many problems that I was facing, including how I couldn't afford the fees to return to school. They told me that they will assist with paying for my fees through the Go Back to School Foundation, and that they would also speak to my parents to provide whatever assistance they could afford," she said.

After this visit, Alinate was convinced. At 16 years old, she returned to school and started Form 1 at Mtakataka Community Day Secondary School, where she is currently studying.

■ DAILY LIFE STRUGGLES ARE STILL EXPERIENCED EVEN AFTER GOING BACK TO SCHOOL

Since returning to school, Alinate hopes for a better future, yet daily challenges remain, both at home and at school. It is a reality that girls are often deprived of basic needs that enable them to attend classes every day.

"Most of the time I don't even have bathing soap, among other needs," she said.

Without the scholarship, her parents would struggle to pay her school fees of about 7,000 Kwacha (about \$10) per term. "I hope the school fees support will continue to be paid because I want to be educated in order to support myself and my daughter in future," she said.

■ A BRIGHTER FUTURE

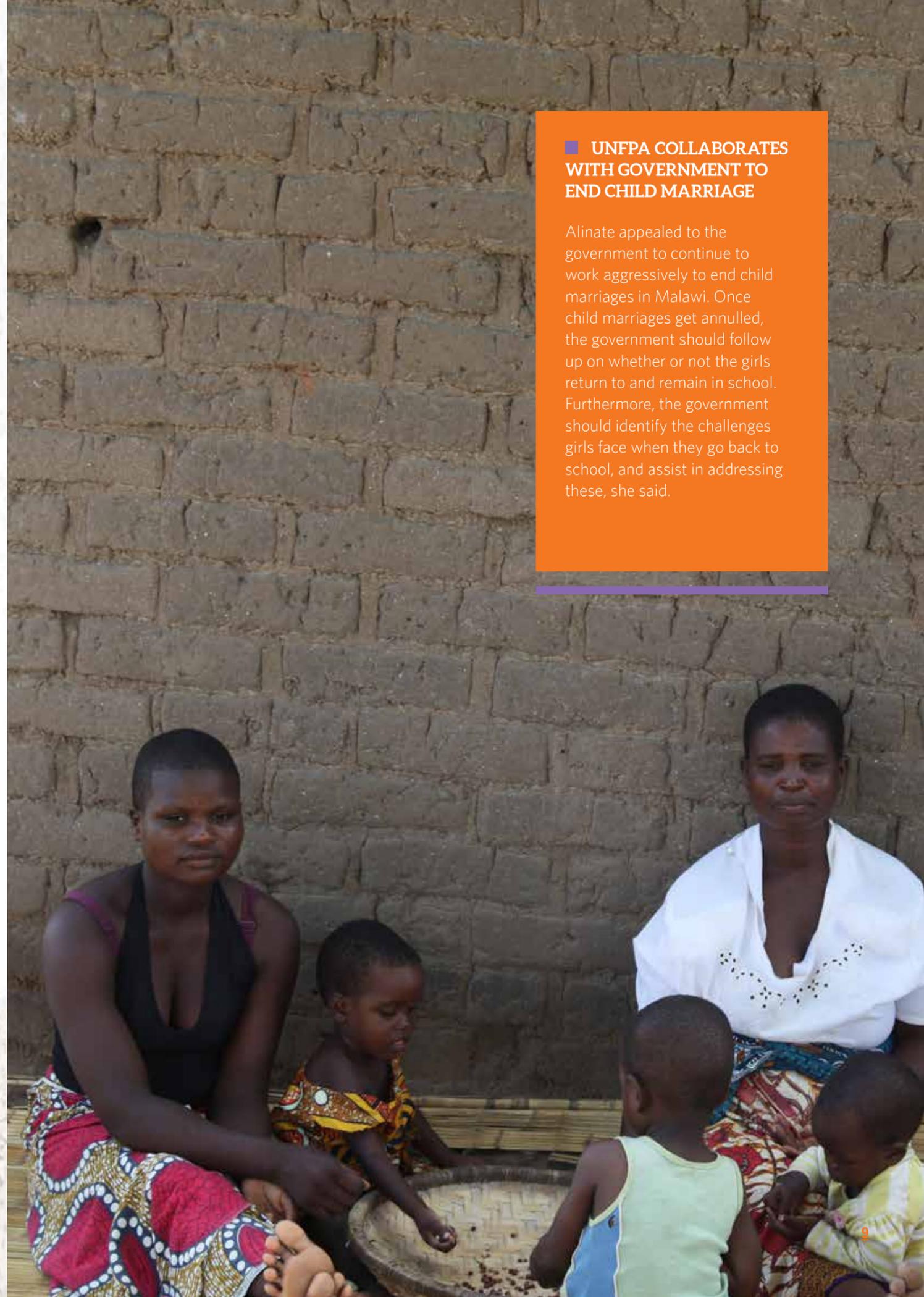
"In spite of the problems of poverty that I still experience, the thought of dropping out of school again hasn't crossed my mind," Alinate said. "When I finish school I want to be a nurse because I am intrigued by their work of helping fellow Malawians whenever they are sick."

Her favourite subjects at school are physics and chemistry, at which she is excelling. "I don't have hobbies but during my free time I sell mandasi (fritters) to get some money to help my family," she said.

*Mother Group: selected women from different village form a group that promotes girls education, SRHR education and ensures girls are not married off whilst young. It is a concept that has proved to be useful in many initiatives targeting young people especially girls.

■ UNFPA COLLABORATES WITH GOVERNMENT TO END CHILD MARRIAGE

Alinate appealed to the government to continue to work aggressively to end child marriages in Malawi. Once child marriages get annulled, the government should follow up on whether or not the girls return to and remain in school. Furthermore, the government should identify the challenges girls face when they go back to school, and assist in addressing these, she said.



F Beatrice

Opted for early marriage because of being an orphan and harsh poverty.

At the age of 17, Beatrice Banda's decision to marry a 21-year-old man seemed a logical one, made without any outside pressure. As a poverty-stricken orphan, marrying a man who could support and take care of her was appealing and reasonable.

Beatrice was born in Noloman Village, in Chief Kachindamoto's area in June 1997. She lost her parents when she was very young and consequently, life became difficult.



Daily life struggles are still experienced even after going back to school



■ ABUSE FROM HUSBAND

But her marriage was an abusive one – her husband used to shout at her and sometimes he beat her. When their relationship broke down beyond repair, the marriage finally ended. Beatrice returned to school and, at the age of 19, she is now in Form 1 at Ntakataka Secondary School.

As often observed, that child brides usually find themselves in a marriage of unequal power relations, and therefore have less ability to negotiate safe sex and faithfulness, putting them at greater risk of STIs including HIV from sexually unfaithful partners.

Looking back, she believes that young girls do not have the mental strength and ability to sustain a marriage. “In a marriage, you all need to be mature enough to deal with challenges of daily life, of which I and my husband were not,” she says.

Beatrice believes that it is important for girls to remain focused on their education, as it prepares them for a better future.

However, there are many challenges to staying in school. Beatrice’s married friends criticize her for not putting up with the hardships, staying married and looking after her child full time. Some boys and young men have urged her to stop attending school and instead, to live with them. Some of the students mock her for being a mother at school. Additionally, her journey to school involves a two-hour walk.

Despite all these difficulties, Beatrice is determined to finish her education. She says she cannot attempt another marriage and drop out of school again. She enjoys most subjects (apart from mathematics) and - inspired by the women dressed in white, working in hospitals - hopes to become a nurse when she completes her education.

■ UNFPA'S COLLABORATION WITH GOVERNMENT OF MALAWI TO END CHILD MARRIAGE

“The Government needs to facilitate more programmes to encourage and empower girls to stay at school,” says Banda.

She believes that if Chief Kachindamoto could locate organizations to provide financial support to girls who have returned to school, their journey to finish school would be more achievable. Moreover, it would motivate more girls to remain in school, despite their challenges.

Bertha

Despite impoverishment and complications when giving birth, Bertha dreams of becoming a nurse.

Due to her family's situation of extreme poverty, Bertha Joseph's father thought that marrying her off would be a good solution to their financial difficulties. Thus, she was married off at the age of 15.

She soon became pregnant and experienced complications during delivery at the hospital, where she gave birth to a girl.



Bertha has great ambitions for her future

Bertha, now 17 years old, was born in Mtakataka in Dedza, where she was raised by her aunt after her mother died when she was an infant.

"I got married at 15 because of profound poverty at home and thought (that) marriage would help lift that burden off my parents. Sometimes we had no food, bathing soap (or) the basic needs to take care of our family at home," she said.

Bertha was married for a year. Her now ex-husband did not pay any dowry at the time he married her. At the time of marriage, the husband was 18 years old and was selling peas and glycerin for a living.

■ COMPLICATIONS DURING CHILD BIRTH

Giving birth to her daughter had not been easy. "I experienced serious complications while giving birth to my daughter because my body was not mature enough for childbirth," she said. As a result, she had to undergo an operation afterwards and was kept in hospital for more than week so that she could recover properly.

■ DISCONTENT TOWARDS CHILD MARRIAGE

Bertha is against the practice of young girls getting married. "I believe it is not good for people to get married early, mostly because marriages have lots of problems that young people may not be equipped to deal with. However,

when you are young and living with your parents you have their support and cannot think otherwise. Of course this is not the case with those single parents or (girls who) have lost both; the lack of parental care forces girls to get married," she said.

She was uncomfortable about getting married at such a tender age. "I was very disturbed by the decision to get married early, because it was not entirely my will to do so. Rather, it was my parents who wanted me to get married," she said.

Her goal to finish school and reach the level of (achievements) that she aspired to was shattered. She suffered physical abuse in her marriage as her husband would beat her, and sometimes he would sleep with other women, she said.

This troubled her, yet initially she never felt empowered to take steps to change the situation. Then she came across some news that brought hope.

■ SENIOR CHIEF KACHINDAMOTO'S INTERVENTION

Due to the difficulties she experienced in the marriage, Bertha sought the help of Senior Chief Kachindamoto, after hearing about the work she was doing in the area.

"I wanted to voice my concerns about my situation in the hope of going back to school," she said. Some women from

the Mothers Group* in the area visited her and encouraged her to return to school. Finally, she did.

■ ENJOYING SCHOOL TO THE FULLEST

Today, Bertha has great ambitions for her future. Currently in Form 2 at Mtakataka Community Day Secondary School, she hopes to become a nurse after completing her education. "I am intrigued when I see nurses injecting me when I'm sick. I would like to perform the same job," she said.

■ CHALLENGES STILL REMAIN

Despite being back in school, Bertha still faces challenges in her daily life. These include her inability to pay her school fees or access necessities such as soap. Nevertheless, she refuses to let this get to her because she knows the benefits of staying in school. "I now know the problems that people face in marriage, hence all I want to do is remain in school and focus on my future," she said.

■ FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Bertha believes the government should help children who have dropped out of school by encouraging them to complete their education. "In most cases, girls drop out due to livelihood hardships at home, but most children want to be in school," she said.



E

Dorah

Married off at 14 years to a fellow teenager of 18 years.

Dorah Nzima was just 14 years old when she got married. As if life as a poor young teenager was not difficult enough, in marriage her situation quickly deteriorated. Her life of poverty was exacerbated by the abuse inflicted by her husband.





Born in Mzimba in northern Malawi in 1995, Dorah was one of six children in their family- two boys and four girls. The family had very little income, and even less after the death of her father when she was very young.

Because of their dire circumstances, she opted to get married when she was 14 years old, in the hope of a better future.

Dorah's husband was 18 years old when they got married. He did not pay a dowry to her family, which signified that the marriage was a loose arrangement. Whilst in marriage, she soon discovered that the man she was married to was not able to provide for their home, and their situation became stressful because they every day was a struggle.

Often times, Dorah faced verbal and physical abuse. Her husband often made her go hungry, and reminded her of the poor home that she had come from and how much she depended on him.

■ ANNULMENT OF CHILD MARRIAGES IN DEDZA

With the enactment by Senior Chief Kachindamoto of new by-laws allowing the annulment of child marriages, the Group Village Headman and the local Mothers' Group counselled Dorah, urging her to leave her marriage after

only a year. The Headman and Mothers' Group also explained the situation to her mother, who agreed to help her return to school. Her mother started a small business of fetching and selling firewood to pay the school fees.

Dorah left Ntakataka Community Day Secondary at age 14, while in Form 2. When she resumed her education a few years later, she picked up where she had left off. Now, at the age of 22 and with a two-year-old daughter, she is enjoying the lessons and her favourite hobbies, netball and reading.

■ FEES AND HARASSMENT

Dorah's final school exam fees of 17,000 Kwacha (about \$24) have already been paid. She has no doubt that she will finish her schooling soon despite the challenges she faces, which include being harassed by men and boys from her community and school respectively, for being a mother at school. Her determination to succeed is admirable.

■ HER MOTHER AS A ROLE MODEL

Dorah has been motivated by witnessing how hard her mother works to earn her school fees and make sure their family is provided for. She wants to become a nurse and a recognized

member of society. She seeks to help women by providing maternal health services, based on her experience of a difficult childbirth.

She envisages a bright future for herself and knows that, once she finishes her education and finds employment, it will be easier for her to educate her child.

FACT
47% of women marry before their 18th Birthday where only 8% of men marry at that age.

Dorah has no doubt that she will finish school, despite the challenges.



■ THE FEELING OF BEING EMPOWERED

Dorah feels empowered being back in school and in this respect, one of her brothers has been an inspiration. Her brother left secondary school in 2012 and moved to Lilongwe City in search of work. But on observing young, educated people in high positions in various companies, he decided to return to the village school and pick up where he'd left off.

Their mother borrowed money from a community bank and sold firewood to pay for his education. As a result, he encourages his sister to continue working hard to secure a good life.



Fanny

**From teen bride to
determination to become a
doctor.**

At the age of 17, Fanny Maseko turned to marriage as a way out of poverty. Her parents, who felt it would lift a heavy burden off them as they were struggling to make ends meet, arranged her marriage.



Long distance to school continues to be an obstacle



"I got married at 17 while in Standard 7. This was due to pressure from my parents, who were overwhelmed by the deep poverty we were experiencing," she said.

Fanny's husband fixed bicycles for a living and together they had a son, who is almost two years old. At the time of their marriage, her husband was close to twice her age.

■ PHYSICAL ABUSE

But contrary to her expectations of a lovely married life, she instead endured financial hardship and persistent physical abuse by her husband.

"When I got married I did not know the value of education, and I thought marriage would address the problems of poverty I was facing. However, there were no positive changes in my life during that time. I was disappointed with myself, that the reason for my getting married was not being fulfilled," she said.

Life for Fanny was tough; her husband did not do much to improve their living standards. She resorted to piecemeal work just to feed her family, only to find her husband was stealing the money she earned and use it for his own needs.

"He would steal some of the money and use it for drinking sprees. Every time I spoke out against such behavior, a beating would follow," said Fanny. Consequently, she would hide her money or take it to her mother for safekeeping.

■ RETURNING TO SCHOOL AFTER A VISIT FROM THE MOTHER GROUP

As they have done for many girls caught up in child marriage in the area of senior chief Kachindamoto, the Mothers' Group visited Fanny and rescued her from her depressing situation. However, she was told clearly that she would be required to return to school.

"I was persuaded by a woman from a Mothers' Group in our area to go back to school. It was then that I realized that my only escape from poverty was education," Fanny said.

Considering that her marriage had brought no value to her life, Fanny took the advice that she was given and returned to school. Finally, her marriage of two years had ended.

"My life is better now that I am back in my mother's house and I am enjoying this new lease of life," she said. She is in Form 1 at Ntakataka Community Day Secondary School.

However, her return to schooling also had a downside. Fanny found herself occasionally being mocked about being a mother, but she has not let this get to her. She enjoys being back in class.

Fanny has strong ambitions for her future – she hopes to become a doctor after completing school.

■ THE LONG WALK TO SCHOOL

Despite Fanny's progress, a major setback is the long walk to school. It takes her two and a half hours to school every morning and again when returning home. This affects her ability to take part in some of the morning lessons. "Sometimes I miss out on lessons and have to catch up because I arrive late at school," she said.

While she is adamant about finishing school, regardless of what life throws at her, she needs a few necessities to overcome her daily challenges.

"A solution to this problem of distance would be to build a boarding facility, though some parents would probably still struggle to afford it. If I am to be given any assistance, my immediate needs are a school uniform, a school bag, a calculator and household needs," said Fanny.

■ PERCEPTION OF MARRIAGE

Like many other girls whose marriages have been annulled, Fanny disapproves of child marriage and is grateful to Senior Chief Kachindamoto for her work in empowering young girls like herself. "There were a lot of child marriages happening in our area and it had become part of the norm, which is something I detest," she said. With Senior Chief Kachindamoto's proclamation to end child marriage, Fanny's future is filled with hope. Her goal now is to remain in school.

■ VIEWS ON GIRLS' EDUCATION

Fanny believes that it is fundamental for girls to stay in school and complete their education: "I believe that girls' education is important as an educated girl benefits the nation," She encourages other girls not to look to marriage as an escape from poverty. "Being uneducated means your husband would have an advantage in the marriage. But an educated wife would not go through the sort of ordeals that I went through," she said.

Joyce

From exploitation by family to standing on her own two feet.

Joyce was born at Mua Hospital in 1994. She lost both of her parents at a very young age and was left in the care of a relation. She comes from senior chief Kachindamoto's area.



It takes over an hour for Joyce to walk to school

Without adequate financial support for school and in need of a better place to stay, Joyce sought solace from a boy and began living with him. By the age of 17, she had fallen pregnant, left school and married. Unable to give birth naturally, she had to undergo an emergency Caesarean section and gave birth to a girl.

Slowly, her marriage fell apart. Her husband did not adequately provide for the family and he began beating her when he came home to find no food in the house. She would report the abuse to his grandmother, and this helped her to cope emotionally – to some degree.

Empowering girls with an education, Joyce believes, is important for them to achieve their goals; it enables them to take care of their children in due course.

“The practice of husbands being the only ones who can provide for the home has become outdated. I feel that married women, especially mothers, should be able to generate their own income as well,” she said.

Women who can fend for themselves are better equipped to avoid getting



into financial difficulty if their husbands leave them.

■ AMBITION TO BECOME A DOCTOR

When Joyce finishes studying, she wants to become a doctor so that she can help sick people. However, her main challenge now is raising funds for school fees and the long distance she has to walk to school. She has many friends, including a few at the school, who give her a sense of belonging to a ‘family’ despite the few who mock her for being a mother while still at school.

■ LONG DISTANCE TO SCHOOL

Joyce has managed to secure accommodation for herself and her daughter, but the journey to school by foot takes her over an hour each way. When she returns home each day, she draws water for an elderly lady to make a little money, and this helps her take care of her daughter. Despite these challenges, Joyce is determined to finish her education and become a doctor.



FACT
8% of women report they experienced sexual violence before they were 22 and 4% experienced sexual violence before they are 18.

■ REQUEST TO GOVERNMENT

Her message to the government is to provide job opportunities for school leavers. It will encourage girls to complete their education if they know that there is a good future ahead for those who remain in school, despite their many challenges.

Madalo

Survivor of abuse now determined to become an engineer .

Madalo was born in Dedza in 1999. She became pregnant while in Standard 8, when she was 16 years old, after being persuaded by her 18-year-old boyfriend to have unprotected sex. Consequently, she dropped out of school and got married to the boyfriend.

But her marriage was short lived due to the verbal and sexual abuse she suffered at the hands of her husband. She decided to call it quits and returned to school.





■ BACK IN SCHOOL

Madalo's family relies on subsistence farming to survive, which remains a challenge for the family, but she is determined to complete her education. Now 18 years old and the mother of a three-year-old daughter, Madalo is currently in Form 2 at Golomoti Secondary School. She is convinced of the importance of being educated and plans to become an engineer.

■ CHALLENGES OF EARLY MARRIAGE FOR TEENAGERS

Madalo comes from a family of four children, and their unemployed mother, who relies solely on subsistence farming, struggles to look after them all. Madalo thought that marriage would resolve most of the difficulties she faced at home.

Yet shortly after getting married, she and her husband began speaking about parting ways. The lack of support she received from him, compounded with the abuse she endured, were highly challenging every day. She could not afford a bar of soap to wash her clothes, nor food for her daughter, as her husband had no form of income. This experience has motivated Madalo to focus on her education.

■ SOLDIERING ON DESPITE EMOTIONAL ABUSE

But change has come at a price. She has faced abuse from her former husband, and now some of her fellow classmates mock her simply because she is a young mother at school. Despite this, with her marriage annulled and being back at school, she feels empowered. She is determined to complete her education.

FACT

29% of women aged 15 to 19 have begun child bearing; 22% have had a live birth and 7% are pregnant with first child.

Madalo faced various forms of emotional abuse

■ NEED FOR MORE SUPPORT

Madalo commends Senior Chief Kachindamoto's initiative to end child marriage. She believes that girls should be supported to complete their education so that they can find good jobs and help develop their villages, their districts and ultimately, their country. However, she would like more assistance with learning materials and school fees.

Madalo stresses the need to raise awareness of the plight of girls who have returned to school, and to mobilize community involvement in the Chief's initiative of ending child marriage. Girls like her would greatly benefit if the government offered school bursaries to help them remain in school and finish their education, she said.



4 Maria

One of eight children and forced into marriage when she fell pregnant at 14.

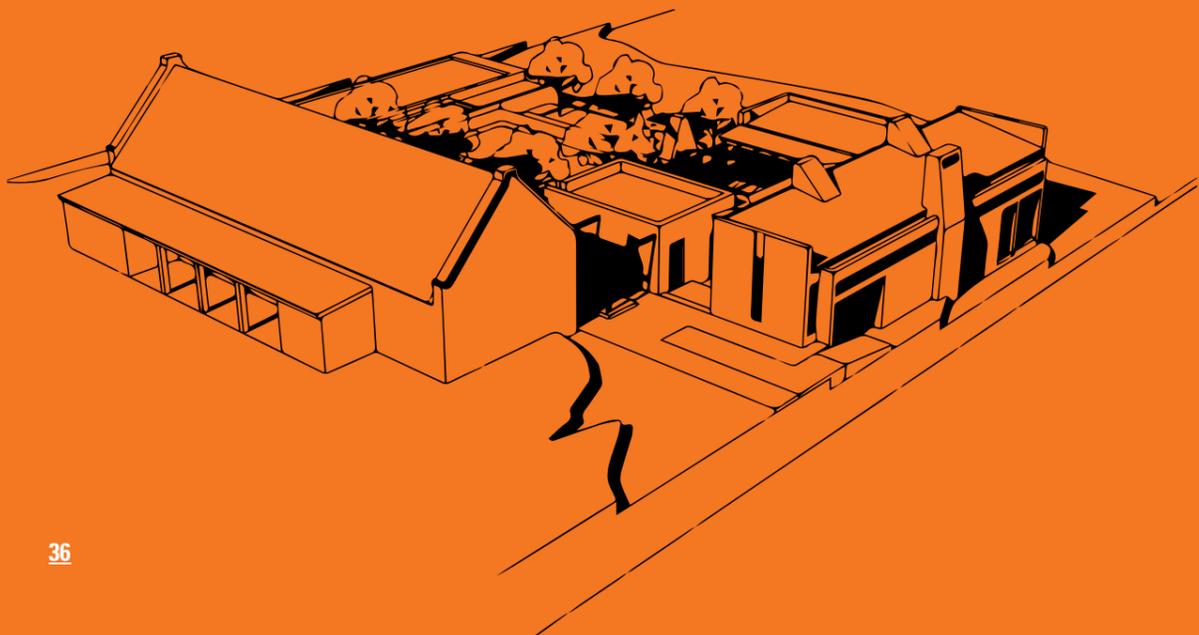
Maria was just 14 years old when she married her boyfriend aged of 16. The marriage was forced on the young couple by her parents when they found out that she was pregnant. Born at Mua Hospital in Senior Chief Kachindamoto in 1999, Maria is one of eight children in her family. Her parents reasoned that they already had a big family to look after; hence, her pregnancy was an added burden they could not afford.





It takes Maria two hours to get to school

She believes building hostels at schools would solve this problem.



FACT
34% of women in Malawi have experienced physical violence since age 15.

■ RESCUED FROM AN ABUSIVE MARRIAGE

But during her marriage her husband beat her constantly and at times, deprived her of food. He would spend the money that the two of them earned from piecework on other girlfriends.

It was a relief for her when women from the Mothers' Group arrived to rescue her from the abusive marriage and encouraged her to return to school.

■ DREAMS OF BECOMING A DOCTOR

Maria is now 18 years old and in Form 1 at Golomoti Community Day secondary School. She is confident that she will finish her education and she dreams of becoming the first head doctor at Mua Hospital, where she was born.

"Ever since I became a teenager, I have yearned to help women in need of surgical operations, hoping to help lower the incidence of women dying while giving birth," she said.

■ ONGOING CHALLENGES

Yet Maria continues to struggle with circumstances of poverty. Getting sufficient food for herself and her 4-year-old daughter is a constant challenge. Her elderly parents have difficulties affording her school fees - with even school shoes are beyond reach. Maria has been compelled to accept financial support from the father of her child, although this income is inconsistent.

■ NEED FOR SCHOOL HOSTELS

In spite of the difficulties, she is determined to complete her education. Building hostels at the schools would help other young people like her who are struggling. The walk to school takes about two hours, and the same back again, and she often arrives home late with very little time left to study. Despite this, she is convinced she will succeed.



■ ADVOCACY TO END CHILD MARRIAGES

While she supports the Chief's Go Back to School initiative, Maria feels that more should be done to support girls. For instance, meetings should be organized where girls like her could talk to other victims of child marriage and to those who have stopped attending school. Given the opportunity, Maria would discuss the importance of education and how she feels that the initiative can be more widespread. "The more educated people there are in TA Kachindamoto's area, the more successful the Chief's tenure will be," she said. This, in turn, would increase the number of citizens who have a direct chance at succeeding in life and helping to develop the country.

E Patricia

**Pregnant from peer pressure,
forced into child marriage.**

Patricia Tobias became pregnant with her boyfriend in 2012, while in Standard 6. She was 16 years old at that time.

This upset her parents as they were already struggling financially.



My parents were against the idea of me going back to school

“Due to peer pressure from my friends at school, I started dating a boy who got me pregnant and I gave birth to a baby girl,” she said.

Due to the pregnancy, her parents forced her to get married and she dropped out of school, joining the growing number of Malawian teenaged girls who leave their studies behind for early marriage.

The boy who got her pregnant paid MK3,000 Kwacha (about \$4) to her family as dowry.

Her 20-year-old husband was unemployed and occasionally did piecemeal work, such as selling chips.

They stayed married for a year.

At times, he would depend on Patricia to bring home money for food – an expectation that contributed to the difficulties she faced while married. “I was required to do piecemeal work at other people’s farms in order to make ends meet and to (put) food on the table,” she said.

If she did not do so, her husband would physically abuse her and they would have heated arguments.

■ BACK IN SCHOOL BUT LIVING ALONE

Patricia’s marital ordeals ended when the Mothers’ Group in her community noticed that she was very young to be married and they encouraged her to go back to school – a move that was against her parents’ will.

However, she returned to school in 2015 and is now in Form 1 at Golomoti Community Day Secondary School. She relishes the opportunity to learn.

But her decision came at a price: “My parents were against the idea of me going back to school because they felt I would waste their money just as I did last time. They also did not allow me back into the family home, so my child and I now live by ourselves,” she said.

However, when she is at school, her mom takes care of her child. However, Patricia has to take over the responsibilities of motherhood as soon as she returns from school, which affects her studies. Despite these challenges, she feels her life has improved now that she is back at school, and the focus is on completing her education.

Despite the challenges she has faced, she works hard to make ends meet, while being dedicated to school and

caring for her child.

Patricia believes that child marriages are wrong because of their many disadvantages; she strongly believes that the girl child’s education is important for empowering women. She enjoys attending classes and loves the fact that she learns something new every day.

■ HIGH UNEMPLOYMENT AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE

Patricia aspires to be a police officer when she completes school. However, she finds it extremely discouraging to see how many people who have finished school do not have opportunities for employment.

“It would be great to have a vocational training school in our area, so that young people like myself can learn to do something productive with our hands, such as tailoring and mechanical work. That way we would not struggle to find something to do once we are done with school,” she said.

She is determined to finish school because of the prospects for a better future. She is encouraged by the fact that the problems she is encountering now are nothing compared to the ones that she experienced while married.

■ CHALLENGES SINCE RETURNING TO SCHOOL

As a single mother with a child, the major challenge Patricia has faced since returning to school is a lack of food. Most days, she does not have food for breakfast before school. “Some evenings, I go to my relatives to ask them if they have any food they can give me,” she said despairingly.

For this reason, she often does piecemeal work, such as collecting water for people and washing their clothes on the weekend, to earn money for herself and her child.

■ CHIEF’S WORK TO END CHILD MARRIAGE

Patricia is thankful to Senior Chief Kachindamoto for all the work that she is doing. She commends the Chief for seeking to end child marriage and is appreciative of her interventions, which have liberated many girls in the district.

Patricia also believes that initiation ceremonies, such as Chinamwali (initiation ceremony that targets girls just as they start menstruation or have reached puberty), need to be stopped. She explained that these ceremonies are one of the root causes of child marriage because of the beliefs passed down to girls that negatively influence their future.



Victoria

Accepting child marriage as a way out of poverty.

Victoria's story is that of an exceptional girl who was determined to overcome the adversities of growing up in poverty. She was born in Dedza district in 1994, one of six children raised by her mother, with financial help from one of her brothers.

Victoria opted for marriage when she was just 15 years old, in the hope of improving her family's circumstances. However, instead of shelter, the marriage meant enduring four years of physical and economic abuse from her husband.





FACT
47% of women marry before their 18th Birthday where only 8% of men marry at that age.

LOSS OF THE BREADWINNER

Victoria, now 22, with two children of her own, recalls how she was better off when she stayed with her 30-year-old brother, the firstborn in her family. He had a job as a painter and was able to help provide for his siblings. Tragically, he died when she was in Form 2.

Without their pillar of support, the family fell on hard times. Lacking sufficient food, unable to afford further education or pay for books or soap, Victoria decided to get married. But deep down in her heart, she did not want to drop out of school.

ALONE IN AN ABUSIVE MARRIAGE

Victoria's husband was a 25-year-old; they have two children aged 3 and 4 years old.

She remembers how married life was a living hell in which she suffered physical, economic and emotional abuse. Her husband would often come home late while drunk and he beat her when she questioned where he had been. Although he received an income, she was often left without food or money. Her mother could not afford to take her back so Victoria's situation became desperate.

HUSBAND DIDN'T WANT VICTORIA TO RETURN TO SCHOOL

When the Mothers' Groups working with Senior Chief Kachindamoto first approached the young couple, Victoria's husband was reluctant to let her return to school. It was only when the matter was about to be escalated to Senior Chief Kachindamoto herself that her husband finally agreed.

The marriage was annulled in 2014 and the path was clear for the mother of two to resume her education in 2015.

ROLE OF MOTHER GROUPS

Victoria is thankful she was rescued by the Mothers' Group working with the District's Senior Chief Kachindamoto, who has pledged to end child marriage and encourages the youth to complete their education. She commends the key role played by the Mothers' Groups in ensuring girls return to school.

"There is (a) need to support them in increasing their capacity and resources, to reach more girls and replicate their efforts to other areas in Malawi, through training others in the country," she said.

SUCCESSING AT SCHOOL WITH THE HELP OF A FRIEND WHO GIVES EXTRA LESSONS

Victoria is now in Form 4. "Life is better," she said, "because I am free from abuse and my future is in my hands." She is set on completing her education.

Fortunately, she lives just 10 minutes from school. She and her sister rent a room, while her children stay with their grandmother. At first, Victoria was mocked by bullies among the students about being a young mother at school. But she was able to ignore their remarks and concentrate on her studies, and now people are more accepting of her situation.

EX-HUSBAND HAS REMARRIED AND DOES NOT PAY MAINTENANCE

Victoria would like to go to college after school, in the hope of becoming financially independent and supporting her mother and her two children. Her ex-husband has remarried and does not pay child maintenance.

In her free time, Victoria braids people's hair to make a bit of money to cover some of her expenses and those of her sister. During the holidays, she goes back to the village to help her mother with farming, and uses some of the money from the sale of their crops to pay her school fees.

Victoria is thankful for being rescued by the Mother Group



GIRLS WANTING TO CONTINUE THEIR EDUCATION NEED MORE HELP

Victoria is grateful for and complimentary about Chief Kachindamoto's initiative, which encourages the youth to complete their schooling. However, she pleads for help from the government to cover expenses such as school fees, food and necessities.

"A lot of girls wishing to continue their education have children and are in dire poverty," she said.



At UNFPA, we commit our continuous efforts and that we will not stop until every woman and every girl child is empowered and is able to realize her full potential regardless of where she is born.

If we change their lives, we can change the nation.



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