

# Action Hope Malawi

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"Improving quality of life"



## RECLAIMING CHILDHOOD-THE STORY OF MWANDIDA



*Image 1: Caregivers being trained in financial management using the PEIS Model*

### **Education as a powerful tool to end poverty and sexual exploitation**

In Malawi, education is known to be a key to success, but without proper support many young people fail to attain it, hence they are forced to engage in risky behaviors for them to meet their daily needs in their societies. This is the case with underage girls that Action Hope Malawi (AHM) is working with in Jali area, Traditional Authority Mwambo through the project "Improving the lives of underage girls in Machinga and Zomba districts" being supported through Aids Fondet.

### **The identification of underage girls in Zomba and Machinga districts**

These underage girls were identified after a report from peer educators and male champions on the presence of girls under the age of 18 in drinking joints. These girls had been forced to drop out of school and engage in transactional sex to address persistent financial problems that they were experiencing at

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their homes. These financial challenges include lack of basic needs and school materials which their parents and guardians were failing to provide.

*"These operating conditions put girls at risk of experiencing various forms of abuse, contracting STIs, and facing stigma and discrimination which also extend to their caregivers",* says Maliko Mpawa, the child protection officer for Jali area. Previously, the Malawi government through the Malawi Police service and the Social Welfare office used to conduct sweeping exercises to remove these girls from the hotspots. However, they proved to be ineffective since the underage girls returned to the places after sometime because the underlying reason, *poverty*, was never addressed.



Image 2: GVH Jali (in white) encouraging caregivers to be at the forefront in ending underage sex work in the area.

## **Improving the lives of underage girls in Zomba and Machinga**

Action Hope Malawi, with support from the Kirk Foundation through Aids Fondet, came to the rescue of 30 girls through the project. *"It was hard to*

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focus in class when you know there is no food at home," said Mwandida while speaking with Action Hope Malawi's Project Officer, Esther. Mwandida explained that she has three friends who also dropped out of school to find ways to survive, knowing that their caregivers could not provide for their needs. "I used to stay with a woman who took me from my grandmother after seeing our daily struggles, promising to have me re-enrolled in school," she said. However, when Mwandida went to stay with the woman, she was never re-enrolled and was instead forced to help with the woman's fish-selling business at Jali Market



Image 3: AHM's PO interacting with caregivers.

Currently, Mwandida has returned to her grandmother and her mother, who was staying in Balaka and doing sex work has also returned to Jali in Zomba. Jali child protection officer took his time to sensitize the mother of Mwandida on the negative impact, leaving a child can have on her personal life and also letting her know that it is a serious offense to neglect a child according to the laws in Malawi.

## **Back to school, rebuilding her future**

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Mwandida has returned to school and has be re-enrolled into standard 6. What seemed as an end to a girl's future was just a little setback requiring a collective assistance. The mother of Mwandida is one of the caregivers who have also benefited from the vocational skills trainings conducted by Action Hope Malawi. Additionally, the caregivers were also introduced to educational savings through the PEIS model purposely designed to support their children's education. *"With the baking skills I have learnt, there is no need to travel to other districts in search of money"* says Mwandida's mother with happiness all over her face. Mwandida's grandmother also showed her appreciation that her family is now back together and Mwandida is back to school.