

ACT ALLIANCE MALAWI FORUM FAITH BASED APPROACH TO ADDRESSING GENDER BASED VIOLENCE

BACKGROUND

In 2019, the ACT Alliance Malawi Forum joined faith organizations from seven Southern African countries to dialogue on religion and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), gender-based violence (GBV) and teenage pregnancies. They co-created three interfaith briefs to serve as discussion papers in their communities.

Adopting the central aspects of the interfaith briefs on GBV and teenage pregnancies, the ACT Alliance Malawi Forum developed a project entitled Faith Based Response to COVID-19 which had as one of its priority areas addressing gender-based violence (GBV). The project was endorsed by ACT Alliance members and its interventions received funding from the Faith to Action Network, DanChurchAid and Christian Aid in Malawi. ACT Alliance worked collaboratively with the Malawi Interfaith AIDS Association (MIAA) to facilitate a united commitment of faith communities in a COVID-19 response with a specific focus on addressing GBV. The project comprised national level advocacy interventions as well as community level interventions that were implemented in the Districts of Karonga, Blantyre, Chikwawa, Dowa and Ntchisi from May to December 2020.

WHO WE ARE AND WHERE WE ARE

The Action by Churches Together (ACT) Alliance Malawi is a network of 14 churches and faith-based organizations. The forum is part of the Global ACT Alliance which is the largest Protestant/Orthodox coalition in the world that engages in humanitarian, development and advocacy work. It consists of more than 130 members working together in over 120 countries to create positive and sustainable change in the lives of poor and marginalised people regardless of their religion, politics, gender, sexual orientation, race or nationality, in keeping with the highest international codes and standards.¹ Within countries, ACT Alliance operates through country Forums which are shared platforms or spaces comprising ACT members and observers from a particular country, sub-region or region.

The members of the ACT Alliance Malawi Forum are Blantyre Synod Health and Development Commission (BSHDC), Churches Action in

Relief and Development (CARD), Evangelical Lutheran Development Service (ELDS), DanChurchAid (DCA), Malawi Council of Churches (MCC), Evangelical Association of Malawi (EAM), Norwegian Church Aid (NCA), Salvation Army, World Renew (WR) and Christian Aid (CA). There is also extended membership to the ACT Alliance Malawi Forum, which includes the Synod of Livingstonia Development Department, Moravian Church Humanitarian Development Service (MoHDeVS), the Christian Service Committee (CHAM) and the Anglican Diocese of the Upper Shire.

Together, members of the ACT Malawi Forum strive for a nation where all people may live with dignity, justice, peace and full respect for human rights and the environment.

GBV, THE UNTOLD PANDEMIC



Despite advances in gender equality over the last decade, Malawi ranks 145 out of 188 countries on the Gender Inequality Index (GII), reflecting high levels of inequality in reproductive health, women's empowerment and economic activity. In addition, violence against women and girls and harmful practices remain serious and the country has much to do in terms of promoting women's empowerment. Currently, out of the 193 parliamentary seats in the National Assembly, 44 seats are held by women,

representing 22.79%, which presents a challenge to maximum representation and deliberation of women's and girls' issues.

There are many traditional practices that are deemed to make young people, especially girls and women, more susceptible to GBV and violence. For instance, some initiation ceremonies encourage adolescents and young people to practice sex soon after the initiation ceremony known as kusasa fumbi. This has been noted in the Machinga (Chiuta presbytery), Mulanje (Thuchila presbytery) and Chikwawa (presbytery) Districts. The role played by the church in these districts may differ but research has indicated that many gaps exist that the church can fill in preventing sexual and gender-based violence, as well as promoting education and building greater awareness of available policies, laws and services and journeying with the survivors and perpetrators.

DEAL WITH THE ROOT CAUSES OF FAILURE IN ORDER TO NURTURE THE ROOT CAUSES OF SUCCESS

GBV was recognized as an urgent public health issue during the COVID-19 pandemic in Malawi. The challenge of violence against women and children is prevalent and continues to be a deeply entrenched problem in Malawi. The severity and prevalence of such violence is one of the factors contributing to inequality between men and women, girls and boys.



The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the main risk factors such as food shortages, unemployment, isolation, economic insecurity and school closures that lead to increased violence against Women and Girls (VAWG). These have seen a marked increase in physical, psychological, sexual and economic forms of GBV. The alliance and its partners drew on the following strategies and interventions to help combat GBV.

The ACT Alliance Malawi forum co-ordinated the development of the COVID 19 Joint Faith Community Response and Adaptation Framework 2021 – 2023 to champion a robust faith-based response to Covid-19 and its impact in particular on GBV to complement government efforts in containing the spread of the corona virus.

On 25 November 2020, Malawi joined the rest of the world in commemorating the 16 Days of Activism against GBV under

the Global theme, "Orange the World: Fund, Respond, Prevent and Collect!"² Supporting the work for the national level commemoration and in the 5 Districts of Karonga, Dowa, Ntchisi, Blantyre³ and Chikwawa, the alliance assisted with community mobilisation, production of banners and T-shirts, and the hiring of tents and public address systems. Traditional dances, poems, solidarity walks and comedies were among the activities for disseminating key messages at the events. The main GBV messages disseminated by different actors and the rights holders themselves, particularly girls and women, were tailored around the four areas of preventing, reporting, responding and funding. During the 16 Days of Activism against GBV, an open day was attended by over 400 community participants, of whom 70% were females, with the aim being to transform harmful practices such as child marriages for dowry and social norms that promote violence against women and girls in Karonga District. Risk factors such as harmful traditions and poverty are seen as accounting for some of these practices. The project collaborated with the office of Gender and Social Welfare to disseminate information on addressing GBV and early marriages.

In a bid to eliminate GBV against women and girls and sustain good practices at grassroots level, several meetings were conducted with faith and community leaders in the 5 target Districts of Karonga, Ntchisi, Dowa, Blantyre and Chikwawa to help strengthen by-laws and GBV reporting. The project collaborated with Social Welfare and Gender officers at District and community levels who facilitated discussions and dialogue sessions to review and strengthen by-laws and reporting mechanisms for protecting women and girls against GBV. Communities were sensitized on available reporting channels and were strongly warned about the dangers of concealing information about GBV perpetrators. The strengthening of community by-laws and reporting mechanisms has thus heightened awareness and advocated for action against GBV and has also positively contributed to the development of a responsive legal environment against GBV at community level. This will hopefully contribute to the reduction of GBV cases in the target Districts and will enhance reporting and early action on any violence against women and girls.

Partnerships and collaboration with government and community leaders has enabled the successful implementation of most of the ACT Alliance Malawi forum's interventions against GBV in general and child marriages in particular. Recognising the efforts of their partners, the Alliance recognised religious and community leaders for their outstanding work and commitment to ending child marriages. A total of 244 faith and community participants across 5 Districts were involved in meetings for strengthening the by-laws and the mechanisms for reporting GBV. A total of 45 faith and community leaders were given monetary rewards as recognition for their efforts to address the child marriages issue. In Dowa District, for instance, T/A Chakhadza received an award for outstanding efforts in championing the initiative by imposing tough penalties on the subjects who are involved with child marriages. In addition, Gule Wamkulu (or "Great Dance") which is a masked dance which takes place at male initiation ceremonies and funerals emerged as one of the outstanding actors speaking out against child marriages in Ntchisi District.

In Karonga one of the recognised faith leaders helped to withdraw a 15-year-old girl child from marriage after both pairs of parents had agreed to the marriage arrangement. The families tried to resist but the faith leader stood her ground by challenging both parties on the negative aspects of child marriages. The leader sought support of other community structures, they won the case and the child returned to school. Also in Karonga, His Royal Highness and Paramount Chief Dr Kyungu's area registered 88 child marriages. With the chief's support, 55 marriages have been nullified, and the project awarded the chief for this action. Similarly, T/A Wasambo in Karonga had 55 child marriages, of which 26 were nullified through the Chief's personal efforts. T/A Wasambo used the acknowledgement support from the award to pay for school fees for one of the withdrawn girls.



**IF YOU WANT TO WALK FAST,
WALK ALONE. BUT IF YOU WANT
TO WALK FAR, WALK TOGETHER**

RATAN TATA

Religious and community leaders were mobilised to act together against child marriages. The project worked closely with the Ministry of Gender to educate religious and community leaders (gate-keepers) on the ills of child marriages and on the laws related to marriage. In Ntchisi, for instance, the project organized a mass meeting aimed at mobilising key leaders and the general public to oppose child marriages. The meeting took place at Mlambe Primary School in T/A Kasakula. Drama, speeches, traditional dances and poetry were the tools used to disseminate important messages.

The faith-based approach to addressing GBV has contributed towards the following:

- Strengthened by-laws for combating GBV and early marriages at community level
- Strengthened legal framework for addressing GBV within CCAP Blantyre Synod
- Clearer societal acknowledgment of the unacceptability of GBV
- Greater recognition and a broader understanding of GBV
- Greater confidence in high-quality and consistent services
- Structured and improved planning and monitoring to ensure continued effectiveness.

WALKING INTO THE FUTURE...

Policies and rules are usually the first steps towards awareness, transformation and behavioural change. Adolescents and young

people's SRH policies would be useful to guide faith congregations on how to handle SRH issues concerning adolescents and young people. The development of a church curriculum on age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education taught through an appropriate ASRHR handbook would also be useful in guiding churches about the content and specific information to be shared with adolescents. Continued collaboration and co-operation with community and government structures will be highly beneficial.

In Malawi the formation of a Faith Leaders Platform on COVID-19 responses comprising both Muslim and Christian leaders drawn from the main religious mother bodies has shown positive results in championing preparedness and response efforts in addressing GBV as one of the noted impacts of lockdown and COVID-19 restrictions. The coherence in messaging of the two major religions (Muslim and Christian) and the unity of messaging delivery provides an important platform for change. Faith leaders are integrated into their communities through service and compassionate networks and are often able to reach the most vulnerable with assistance and GBV/SRHR information and identify those most in need. They are a critical link in the safety net for vulnerable people within their faith community and wider communities.



It can now be said that there is greater awareness of harmful practices that lead to GBV and there is an army of champions within both religious and community leadership to fight the scourge of GBV. The foundation has been laid, and what remains to be done is to continue the work of building and maintenance of transformative systems.

REFERENCES

1. <https://actalliance.org/about/> Accessed on 10 April 2021
2. <https://www.mwnation.com/of-16-days-of-activism-against-gbv/>
3. https://drive.google.com/file/d/175fxuvU_UodYH62mdlhq2SWaxKmDjLF/view?usp=sharing

The ACT Alliance Malawi Forum participated in a series of interfaith dialogues on women's rights and gender equality facilitated by Faith to Action Network and ACT Ubumbano. On that occasion, 12 faith organizations from seven countries in Southern Africa declared, "We can no longer be silent as we are called to uphold human dignity for all creation." Coming from Bahai, Christian, Muslim and Traditionalist faiths, they developed

three Interfaith briefs on sexual and reproductive health and rights, gender-based violence and teenage pregnancy. They also identified opportunities in engaging more effectively within their faith communities. Faith to Action Network and ACT Ubumbano supported their action plans through micro-grants and technical assistance, contributing to many inspiring results like those mentioned in this case study.

CONTACT US

ACT Alliance Malawi
Matthews Msiska

Email: matthewsmsiska@gmail.com

Mobile: +265 888 45 47 32

Faith to Action Network
Peter Munene

Email: petermunene@faithtoactionnetwork.org

Mobile: +254 722 443 306

Website: faithtoactionnetwork.org

ACT Ubumbano
Zanele Makombe

Email: zanele@actubumbano.org

Mobile: +27 71 575 9336

Website: www.actubumbano.org

ACT UBUMBANO

