



Bi-Annual Progress Report

Name of Organization: Community Forum (COFO)

Name of Project: Promoting Gender and Education

Reporting Dates covered in this report (six months): 30th August 2019

Compiled and Submitted By: Joshua A. Malunga (Executive Director)

Email: cofmw@gmail.com

Website: www.cofomw.wordpress.com

This report summarises various achievements made during the period of 1st March, 2019 to 30th October, 2019 on Girls Education.



Project background:

Community Forum (COFO) is a local non-profit organization currently working in the Lower Shire southern region of Malawi. COFO is implementing a project called 'Promoting Gender and Education - Improving access to, and quality education for girls' in Chikwawa district, Malawi. The project is empowering the girls and boys in youth clubs and schools where teenagers are given the chance to voice their opinions, talk about sexuality and engage in dialogues on gender, education and various other topics through the involvement and engagement of community leaders, youth, girls, boys, parents, teachers, community, media, civil society and city council. Young girls and boys directly benefit from the project for gender and education, ending early/child and forced marriages. All the stakeholders and beneficiaries are also kept in the broader impact of the intervention. The project interventions consist of awareness raisings, mobilizations, sensitizations, capacity buildings, advocacy, collaboration and liaison development, action based networks, active participation, development strategies, consultations, uplifting voices for the prevention, referral and rehabilitation of the victims of early marriages, gender and girls education.

Project Goal

- To have a conducive school environment for girls and boys to access education that is inclusive for all in Chikwawa district.

Specific objectives

- 1) To combat gender based violence for girls and boys in primary and secondary schools in Chikwawa district.
- 2) To build the capacity of school and community structures to effectively respond to cases of gender based violence.
- 3) To empower girls with life skills to ensure prevention of gender based violence at school and community levels.
- 4) To enhance networking and collaboration between COFO and relevant stakeholders at district and community levels.

Project Targets:

The primary beneficiaries of this initiative are adolescent girls aged below 18 years. These are targeted considering that these ages are the ones that access education in primary and secondary schools in Malawi. Secondary beneficiaries are teachers, parents and opinion leaders in communities who take centre stage in ensuring that girls and boys are protected from gender based violence acts.

Project values:

Definition of Rights:

Rights are those demands and expectations of an individual from his/her society that he/she believes to be entitled to. In other words right is the ability to achieve those things and facilities...etc. for which man is entitled. All rights are universal and belong to all people. It is

applicable to all human beings irrespective of their class, caste, gender, ethnicity, religion, disability, sexual orientation or anything else. We must all be active participants in creating global norms by which we hold governments, communities and ourselves accountable.

Understanding Gender and Sex

Discrimination, whether covert or overt, occurs in all strata of society. One of the reasons why gender discrimination occurs is because people confuse sex and gender. Sex (whether you are male, female or intersex) is biologically determined while gender is a product of socialization. It is one's socialization that determines feminine and masculine traits that individuals are expected to have in society. Gender inequalities come about because societies expect women to behave "in a certain way" – such as they should not raise their voice, they have to get married by a certain age, they have to serve their husbands and parents-in law and so on. Similarly, men are supposed to protect their family; they have to earn; they should have loud voices and strong bodies and so on. If men and women do not perform these roles, then they face harassment and violence. This is how gender inequality plays out.

Early/Forced Marriage: A Violation of Human Rights

With each case study discussing the impact of early marriage on a specific human rights issue – health, employment, domestic violence, education and right to choice – it is important to deepen understanding on each of these rights. Additionally, it is also crucial to make links between each of these rights. For example, if girls have to discontinue education, they will not be qualified to find suitable jobs. If girls do not find jobs, they will be financially dependent on their husbands. In case they face domestic violence, this financial dependence may become a barrier to them making a decision to leave the violent household. Similarly, if girls do not receive comprehensive information on contraception, or family planning, they will not be able to make informed decisions on when to have children. This may lead to early pregnancies, thereby putting their lives and health at risk.

Strategy planning to End Early/Forced Marriages

Gender, girls' education and early marriage are complex problems that demand complex and multi-layered solutions. Therefore, it is important to reach out to, and convince all stakeholders that these problems must be resolved. From all stakeholders one may hear common arguments about how women must get married eventually, or that early marriage is a fool proof way of providing them protection from sexual violence. Having easy-to-understand hand-outs on the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act is a useful tool when conversing with them. Also, it is important to make these leaders understand their value and special status in their communities. Like teachers, community leaders command tremendous respect in the community and can easily exert influence on families to prevent early marriages. Religious leaders also command respect within their communities. One may hear arguments from religious texts and sources cited as justification for practices on gender, education and early marriage. This needs to be challenged

and we must be equipped with knowledge on what religious texts tell us about marriage and about the status of women in our societies.

The consultation, suggestions, opinions, strategies, mechanisms, methodologies and approaches for The Community Strategy to End Early/Forced Marriages were also discussed with the participants and are to be incorporated in the Promoting Gender and Education Project.

Achieved Activities

District Executive Committee Meeting

A one-day introductory meeting conducted with the District Executive Committee. The meeting was aimed at informing stakeholders at district level about the project and call for their support to ensure its success. This has helped to popularise the project and amass support from partners such as the District Youth Office, District Social Welfare, NICE and District Health Office. We have also lobbied for their involvement in project supervision at community level and for them to take charge in the identification of cultural norms that perpetuate limited access to and demand for sexual and reproductive health information and services for and by young people.



Meetings with traditional leaders

A one-day meeting was conducted with opinion leaders to introduce the project to them. The meeting also aimed at lobbying for their involvement in project supervision at community level and to take charge in the identification of cultural norms that perpetuate limited access to and demand for sexual reproductive health information and services for and by young people. Four Chiefs, two religious leaders and 26 various decision makers were invited to the meeting.



Conducting open days to sensitize the communities to the dangers of forced marriage and early pregnancies

The project has used Football and Netball Tournaments as an awareness tool to disseminate information while mobilizing youth at sporting activities. Tournaments are held once every quarter and the different teams compete for the prize money.



Dance concerning the impact of gender and education



Music to mobilize people to share the issue of Gender



Training of Youth Club Matrons and Patrons

The project has trained 25 patrons, matrons and potential youth members in schools and out school clubs. Training sessions build up the capacity of members of the clubs to provide relevant and adequate knowledge on early marriage, life skills, career guidance, effects of violence against girls and other cross-cutting issues.



Training the patrons, matrons and other youth members in schools and schools

Procurement of project equipment

The project has also procured 130 T/Shirts which help to spread messages on the effects of child marriage, violence against girls, good behavior and the importance of accessing education.

The project has procured **one Laptop Computer, one printer and one Digital Camera** that is helping in report writing, data management and networking and collaboration between project staff, stakeholders and the donor. The digital camera is enabling the taking of pictures to support and supplement project reports.



T/shirts distributed to patrons, matrons and chiefs to disseminate the information about gender and education for both girls and boys at the community level.

Conduct dialogue and review meetings with stakeholders and youth

The project has held 3 meetings with 26 mother support groups, 16 School Management Committees (SMCs), 12 teachers, 6 community leaders, 12 patrons and matrons to advocate for enhanced school management action in encouraging girls and boys in school to work hard in their academic studies. This has helped to increase the performance rate of girls in their studies. The aim was to encourage parents and teachers to take measures of ensuring that girls and boys have quality basic education and are able to excel in their studies and access higher levels of education.



Meeting with stakeholders in schools



Meeting with youth groups



Youth groups



Organized awareness raising campaigns for youth to uplift their voices for the prevention, rehabilitation of victims of gender, early marriages, gathering with youth, parents, media, civil society and religious groups.

COFO has organized awareness rising campaign gatherings with community representatives, line departments, teachers, media personnel and civil society in Matechanga Motel. The participants and speakers were formally invited. The session was held on 22nd July 2019 with the participation of 45 persons from different backgrounds. COFO's Executive Director informed the participants about the objectives of the project on gender, education and end early and forced child marriages. He said that every two seconds, a girl becomes a bride. Early marriages are a violation of girl's rights, forcing them out of education and to have babies before their bodies are ready.

He elaborated that child marriage is one of the most wide spread human rights violations that exist in the country. Girls from poor households are likely to be married as children. Being forced into marriages before one is able to give consent violates the basic human rights of boys and girls.

Mrs. Mahata, a district social officer, further shared about the Child Marriages Restraint Act; she explained that this law, which governs child marriages in Malawi, specifies that the legal minimum age for marriage is 21 years for boys and 18 years for girls. The law states that a male person above the age of 21 contracting a child marriage shall be liable to imprisonment up to maximum period of 14 years and or with a fine.

The Chief Odilo further said that we need to develop an informed and skilled cohort of youth and caretakers enabled to claim their rights, securing the efforts to end early, child and forced marriages, promote gender and education practices and support ending child and forced marriages a more favorable policy environment.



Chikwawa District Social Officer (Mrs. Mahata)



Meeting with mother groups to share the experience



Chief Odilo



Young Female teachers from primary schools

Conducted a one day seminar for the youth to access social and institutional safety nets for the prevention, referral and rehabilitation of victims of early marriages

COFO has organized a one day seminar on gender violence and the impact of education with youth and caretakers. Girls, boys, students, brides and grooms, minority women, teachers and elected representatives participated in the seminar. The participants were officially invited. There were 50 participants at the meeting which was held at NICE Hall on 12th May, 2019.

Mr. Joshua Malunga, the Program Coordinator, updated the seminar participants about gender, education and early /forced marriages. He pointed out that child marriage is a human rights violation. Despite laws against it, the practice remains widespread, partly because of poverty and gender inequality. Speaking on the subject he said that in developing countries, one in every three girls is married before reaching the age of 18. The Executive Officers of COFO explained to the seminar participants that child marriage, which is marriage before 18 years of age, is considered a violation of human rights. Gender, education, early and forced marriage has been an issue for a long time, and owing to its roots in out-of-date cultural and religious practices and protection it has been a hard battle to fight.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Monitoring has been conducted weekly, monthly, and quarterly and performance monitoring has been used to identify existing gaps within planned actions and the actual progress made. Bi-annual reviews of project evaluations have been conducted in order to continue improving the project's performance and ensure proper sustainability of knowledge and male and female involvement in development activities. The project's financial and narrative reports have been submitted according to guidelines and requirements. Lunch allowances for participating stakeholders have been provided by COFO due to the long distances and challenging roads covered during field visits.

Greatest successes over the past six months

The Promoting Gender and Education Project has managed to reach out to 490 beneficiaries in two Traditional Authorities (Mulilima and Katunga) communities; with this high figure we fulfilled our target, and reached 100% of our expected client base for these project quarters.

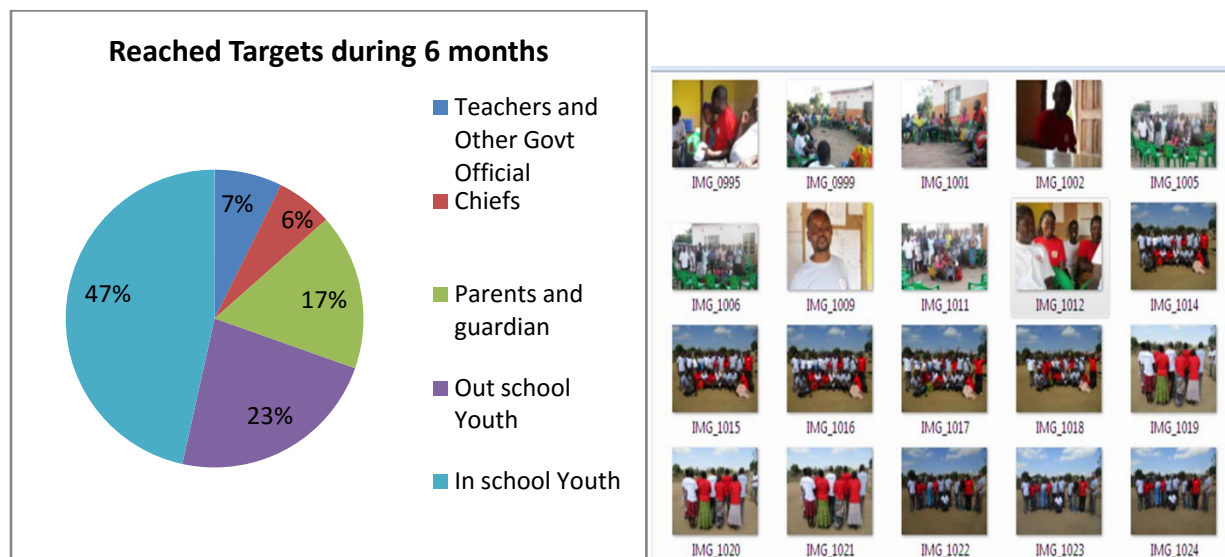
The project continues to greatly value the communication existing between COFO, Project Field Workers, Community leaders, teachers, youth clubs and other stakeholders which is vital to ensure that we meet the stated goals and objectives of the project. COFO Management is able to motivate Field Workers, making their job easier and more enjoyable when interacting with Community leaders, teachers and youth clubs and the beneficiaries within the various communities and schools. This has facilitated good rapport which makes it easier for knowledge and other services to be received effectively by the beneficiaries and stakeholders.

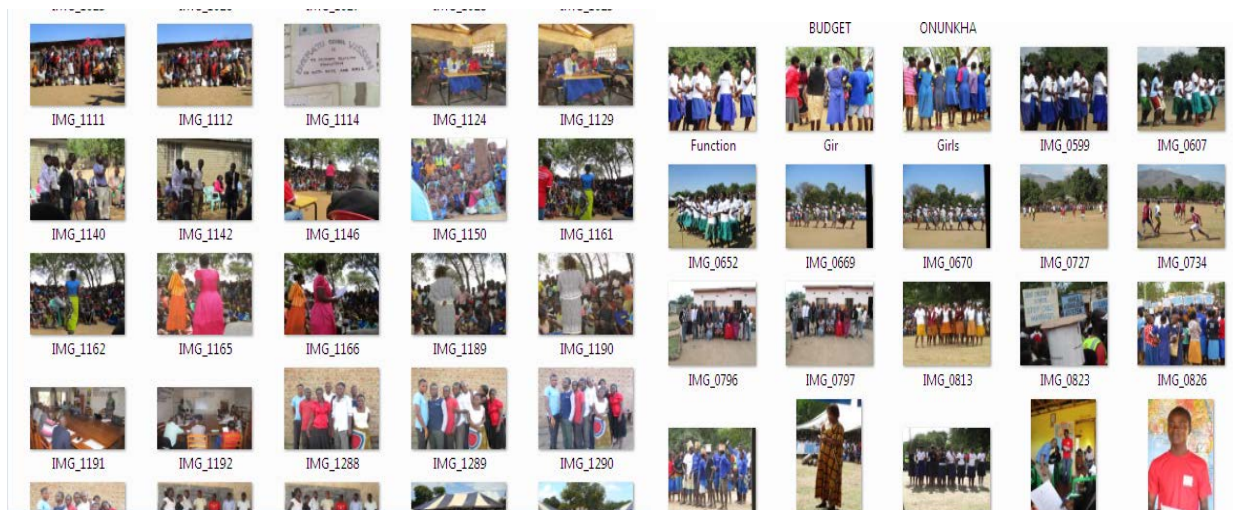
We are also seeing more men and boys coming together with women and girls to combat Gender-Based Violence. Initially, the project trained 20 participants to become 'Trainers of Trainers' who then lead training sessions against Gender Based Violence with other men in

various target communities and schools. This training process has seen the number of men involved in the project rise to sixty (60), an increase to more than double. This indicates that men and boys are slowly changing their mindset towards having a Gender-Based Violence free community, where men and women are equal partners in development.

Through the gender mainstreaming training, COFO staffs are developing projects and programmes that mainstream gender and development issues. Currently COFO is running a project called 'Girls Empowerment' where gender has become a focal concern in project staff recruitment, task allocation, community involvement and identification of beneficiaries, where most of the beneficiaries are teen mothers. More importantly, COFO is in the process of developing a Gender Policy which will provide guidance in gender management.

Furthermore, the project facilitated the revamping of Belo Gender Based Group which works hand in hand with Chiefs, District Council and Village Development Committees. This committee managed to support orphans and vulnerable girls and boys at the community level with various technical and school materials.





Greatest challenges over the past six months

Looking at the resources we are able to provide compared to the number of people we have to reach, there is still great room for improvement. The project is currently serving 50 individuals every month, yet our database contains details of more than 600 girls and boys who require support from COFO. Clearly there is huge room for improvement concerning gender, education, child marriage and girls' empowerment. This must be achieved before we can consider other options in the fight to reduce the number of cases of gender inequality, school dropout and child marriage.

The project has been unable to meet some of its targets due to the unstable economy of Malawi. The Kwacha continues to decrease in value, an issue which has led to our inability to carry out further activities. The devaluation of the Kwacha also increases the cost of living. This is impacting heavily on project staff as they are still receiving salaries below the recommended minimum wage.

Feedback of participants:

The students and youth pledged and forwarded their commitments that they will work as change agent to promote gender, education and end early/child and forced marriages within their homes, families, relatives, streets, villages, schools and neighbours etc.

The consultation, suggestions, opinions, strategies, mechanism, methodologies and approaches for the Strategy to Promote Gender, Education, End Early/Forced Marriages were also discussed with the participants and stakeholders and the findings are to be incorporated in the Promoting Gender and Education project Strategy to promote gender, education, end early/forced marriages project. This strategy will be finalized before the end of the project.

All the participants appreciate the efforts made by the Community Forum (COFO).

Participant's suggestions, analysis and recommendations:

Mr. Joseph Chamambala, representative of NICE, shared his views on gender, education, and early / forced marriages in both international and national contexts and he informed that several surveys have shown that over a period of time the number of female's who are married at a young age has increased; and that the average age of marriage for females has also gone down. The phenomenon is also more prevalent among lower classes, poor families and in households where there are no literate female members. Quite a large number of child marriages are experienced in families where the head of the family is uneducated.

Mrs. Mahata briefed the participants about Exchange marriage, or Fisi, which is also practiced in many parts of Malawi, such as Chikwawa and Nsanje districts. In the practice of Exchange marriage, or Fisi arrangement, both families trade brides. Both families must have a daughter and a son and must be willing to betroth them to the daughter and son of the other family. Exchange marriage or Fisi marriages put females in a precarious position as a divorce between one of the couples may trigger a divorce between the other couple because of strong sibling ties.

The Chief Lauji spoke to participants on unknown marriage as a complex problem and the need for priority intervention to eradicate this nuisance from society. An early/forced marriage interrupts human truths as well as puts health at risk. Therefore it is imperative to tackle the issue and to convince the other communities to pass a bill regarding child not bride. The chief assured that he will explore all his potential to convince the Traditional Authorities to revise the current bylaw and raise the age for marriage to 18 years for girls and 21 for boys in an effort to defend their basic rights.

The suggested amendments to the bylaw:

- Whoever performs, conducts, directs or abets any child marriage shall be punishable with rigorous imprisonment which may extend up to three years but not less than two years and with fine which may extend up to seven hundred and fifty thousand kwacha but not less than five hundred thousand kwacha unless he proves that he had reasons to believe that the marriage was not a child marriage.
- Where a child contracts a child marriage, any person having charge of the child, whether as parent or guardian or any other person or in any other capacity, lawful or unlawful, including any member of an organization or association of persons who does any act to promote the marriage or permits it to be solemnized, or negligently fails to prevent it from being solemnized, including attending or participating in a child marriage, shall be punishable with rigorous imprisonment which may extend up to three years but not less than two years.

Sharing something that we feel is particularly innovative about our work.

1. The Promoting Gender and Education project continues to be a unique platform for girl's empowerment. The project has employed a young woman who is involved in the girls' activities. Their role in the community is visible which helps remove traditional stigmas about women working outside the domestic sphere, and instead proves they are valuable individuals in removing the stigma surrounding gender and education within communities.
2. The excellent communication with village leaders, teachers and youth clubs has lead to increased identification of specific needs. Although in most ways a positive outcome, it has brought to light the limited resources which COFO can provide. The quantity of boys and girls who need our services vastly outweigh those whom we can currently target.
3. A key part of our youth group programme is the football team. This July and August our international volunteers have become heavily involved in this aspect of the project. Through the cultural exchange and discussion, the members of the football team have decided to fundraise for a football kit themselves. The self-driven idea of the youth shows how the youth group is constantly developing, and teaching boys and girls to work together and push the limits of their own achievement, encouraged by the cultural exchange volunteers provide.

Lessons Learned:

Addressing any issue in the target area, the key stakeholders should be involved; it is very important that for each intervention targets groups and stakeholders are clearly defined, thus enabling the achievement of the desired goal. In this project the target groups and stakeholders were already defined and we have gone through our strategy to work directly with our target group as well as with stakeholders, thus the activities of the second quarter have achieved the expected mile stone of the quarter successfully

Recommendation:

The adopted approach, mechanism, methodology and strategy for accomplishing the project interventions and achieve mile stones are working very well, so this approach should be continued till the end of the project: if by then we feel the need to change the mechanism, methodologies and strategies, we will do so, in order to successfully achieve the stated project goal.

Promise

Keep the promise and continue the work on gender and education, end early and forced marriages for brighter future & dignity.