



SCOPE HIV SUCCESS STORY

MALAWI

NAME AND ROLE

Maria (name has been changed to protect confidentiality), student

LOCATION

Mangochi District, Malawi

SUMMARY

SCOPE HIV is working with *SASA! Faith* to decrease violence against women and girls, which is both a driver and a barrier in the HIV pandemic. This is the story of a young girl who was considering dropping out of school to start a family with her boyfriend until a *SASA! Faith* Community Action Group intervened with her parents sharing about the negative effects of early marriage.

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SASA! FAITH COMMUNITY ACTION GROUPS: ON THE MOVE PREVENTING EARLY MARRIAGE IN MANGOCHI DISTRICT

In addressing the devastating effects of HIV, the SCOPE HIV program has prioritized prevention, care, and treatment in its collaboration with local community leaders. Preventative strategies within this program focus on the link between high rates of sexual and gender-based violence and the spread of HIV. In Malawi, sexual and gender-based violence affects up to 25% of young people in the country under the age of 15 and often follows them into later life relationships. For girls in particular, this threat of violence can take the form of child marriage. Through its partnership with local initiative *SASA! Faith*, SCOPE HIV is working to address these challenges and inequities affecting girls through the mobilization of community activists that include Community Action Groups. Community Action Groups train volunteers in prevention, intervention and advocacy techniques. These techniques are impacting communities with long-term assistance while also enacting real change in the lives of individual girls like Maria (name changed to protect privacy).

COMMUNITY ACTION GROUPS PROTECTING MARIA AND HER RIGHT TO EDUCATION

Maria is a 15-year-old student in Mangochi District, Malawi. Recently, a local suitor proposed that Maria leave school to marry him, convincing her parents that this was in her best interest. Maria's life-altering dilemma came to the attention of a nearby *SASA! Faith* Community Action Group. As a result of their training to prevent HIV and violence against

women, this group intervened to rescue Maria from a dangerous arrangement.

Members of *SASA! Faith's* four Community Action Groups in Mangochi district are local volunteers, many from local faith communities, who have completed a four-part training. Meeting with Maria's family in a non-threatening environment, members from one of these groups utilized their advocacy training to assure her parents of the benefits of youth education. Prior to this visit, Maria's family had maintained negative views on education and had perceived early marriage as a positive life choice. They were not only unaware of the dangers this lifestyle posed to their daughter but were also uneducated concerning legal restrictions in Malawi, where the legal age of marriage is 18. Due to the Community Action Group's thoughtful engagement, Maria is now continuing her education, her marriage plans have been dissolved, and her family is committed to

protecting their daughter's right to education, securing hope for her future.

SASA! FAITH MAKING CHANGES IN MANGOCHI DISTRICT

Maria's story is just one example of the risks being averted as a result of SCOPE HIV's partnership with *SASA! Faith*. Community Action Groups are one of the key strategies for bringing community awareness and individual support to vulnerable populations like women and youth in Malawi. As SCOPE HIV continues working towards mobilization, community activism, and advocacy support through this partnership, increased access to necessary HIV prevention and treatment options can be expected to spread to the majority of the at-risk population, community by community.

This story is written by Linda Banda, SCOPE HIV District Coordinator and Elizabeth Cooper, SCOPE Communications Intern.