

Girl Power: Closing the Gender Gap in Malawi

Girls in Malawi's ZOE program are overcoming more than poverty – they are fighting against gender discrimination and becoming role models for others in their communities. “Customary practices [in Malawi] often restrict women's ability to own or operate land,” said Mercy Nyirongo, program manager for ZOE Malawi. “They own fewer of the working animals needed in farming, like goats and cattle, and do not always have control over income from the typically small animals they manage, such as goats, sheep, pigs and poultry.” In Malawi, fewer girls are educated, which limits their income and access to credit and business loans. These young women, unable to invest in better tools, more land, and other resources, are restricted in their income potential, leaving them vulnerable and often struggling in poverty. As a result, they can often end up in child marriages, having children at a very young age, or resorting to prostitution to make ends meet.

“The gender gap is manifest in other ways,” said Nyirongo. “Girls are traditionally responsible for household obligations such as collecting water and fuel, working on household plots, processing and preparing food and maintaining the house. This situation is worse for orphans and vulnerable children. With scant availability of laborsaving technologies like boreholes and grain mills, these responsibilities significantly limit the time girls can spend on productive activities.” ZOE's empowerment program addresses this issue by empowering girls alongside boys with the same training and resources to become productive and educated members of their community. Girls in ZOE's program own or rent their own land, learn about their rights, and generate income and harvests that will allow them to grow their farms over time. It may not sound revolutionary to those living in the US, but in Malawi, it is changing the game for girls.

“Today, I am happy that I have made it and my garden looks so good,” explained Theresa Botomani, a ZOE participant. “I would like to encourage my fellow girls that everything is possible. Before I joined ZOE I used to beg to eat, but that will not be the case this year. I am anticipating bumper harvest.” Today there are hundreds of girls in the ZOE Malawi program who are overcoming extreme poverty and becoming self-reliant. Young Malawian women, once vulnerable, are now running successful businesses and becoming skilled farmers, while providing for their younger sisters so they can attend school. “When girls are empowered economically and socially,” said Nyirongo, “they become leaders and agents of change for economic growth, social progress and sustainable development.”