



Malawi's Other Banda

Memory Banda, not 20 yet, has spent the past few years of her young life in Malawi campaigning against child marriage. Her efforts are paying off.

WORDS PHILIPPA GARSON IN NEW YORK

When I ask petite Memory Banda whether she is married, her answer is an emphatic “No!” It’s a loaded question for Banda who has spent the past few years of her young life campaigning against child marriage in Malawi. She has come to the Social Good Summit in New York in September to talk about Girls Empowerment Network Malawi (Genet) and Let Girls Lead, the organizations she works tirelessly for to stop child marriage in Malawi and beyond.

But she doesn’t have long to talk to me: She’s about to meet First Lady Michelle Obama, which she’s really excited about.

“Of course I have intentions to get married one day,” a vivacious Banda, who is almost 20, tells me. “But only when

I’m done with school.” She’s keen to talk too about the career options in communications – or possibly law – that she’s hoping to pursue but her current mission is more pressing: to stop child marriage in Malawi, a country with one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world.

Although the situation has improved there, with the banning of the practice in February last year, it is still commonplace for Malawian girls to marry very young. The legal marrying age is now 18, but with their parents’ consent, they can still marry as young as 15. Banda’s own sister was married at 11 to a man in his 30s and she now has several children. Some of her cousins too are in a similar predicament. And despite the legislation, child marriage continues – if under the radar.

“When I saw my peers, I was not impressed with the life they were living,” says Banda. She knew from the outset that she wanted a different path for herself and for other girls in her country and on the continent.



Memory (right), Justice and Tadala, the three leaders from Malawi who participated in Rise Up’s Girls Behind the Camera in 2012

Central to child marriage is the brutal traditional practice of *kusasa fumbi*, which takes place in southern Malawi. This involves the sexual initiation of young girls at a special initiation camp in their village by an older man known as a “hyena”. The man has sex with them and teaches them how to pleasure their future husbands.

“Of course, it’s not his or her first time. And little is known about him. He could be infected with HIV,” says Banda. This practice robs the young girls of their childhood. When they come out, they soon get pregnant or married,” she says.

It’s no surprise that Malawi has one of the highest rates of maternal deaths in the world. What’s more, 10% of the population is HIV-positive.

But thanks to the efforts of Banda and the advocacy organizations behind her, the new legislation was passed. Other steps have also been taken to spread the message and change attitudes. Much work has been done with rural chiefs to put a stop to the *kusasa fumbi* tradition as well as child marriage.

Several years ago, over 200 girls who were trained in the Chiradzulu District of southern Malawi to

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persuade 60 village chiefs to make and enforce by-laws to protect girls from early marriage and sexual initiation. Now men who marry girls under the age of 21 must pay penalties to the chiefs in the form of goats or their land. Parents who allow or promote marriage of their under-age daughters are also penalized.

So far the efforts of Banda and her colleagues have largely paid off.

“Two or three years ago it was really bad. But there has been a lot of change in different communities,” she says.

Now, initiation camps have become a “positive” educational experience, where no “sexual cleansing” takes place and where girls learn about their bodies.

It’s no surprise that economic drivers are often behind the choice of young girls – or their parents – for early marriage.

“When you encourage girls to stand on their own they will ask you, ‘but where will I get the money?’” says Banda. “But I grew up with nothing. Still, I was able to move out,” she says. “I challenge that thinking and I encourage them to think not just of now but of the future.” **EW**

‘I Bought Rat Poison To End It All’

The account of a 13-year-old forced to marry in Ghana.

WORDS PEACE HYDE

It’s 2PM in Kumbosigo, Bolgatanga, in the Upper East region of Ghana, and Sekina (*real name withheld*) meets me at an abandoned church behind her village.

She is with her mother who looks slightly uncomfortable about the meeting. We enter the church through a small opening, with my local guide, Yusuf, who also doubles as a translator.

Sekina and her mother are both Hausa. Sekina is 15 years old. She was pulled out of formal education at the age of 13 to marry a 27-year-old man. A year ago, she ran away from her husband’s home to her mother with her six-month-old daughter.

“I decided it was time to leave when I bought rat poison to end it all,” recalls Sekina.

She had mixed it with her food and had written a note to her mother with instructions to take her little girl back to her village. Just before she took her first bite, she heard her daughter crying inconsolably.

Sekina calls it divine intervention and believes the crying of her daughter was a sign from above to take a second shot at life. She took that chance, packed her belongings and set off on the day-long journey to her village.

Child marriage is rampant in Ghana. According to figures from the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the country accounts for the highest incidence of child marriages in the world recording a national average of about 25% in 2008. Projections for this trend estimate a rise in the number of marriages from the 2010 figure of 277,000 to 407,000 by 2030.

The practice is deeply rooted in tradition and religious beliefs. Sekina’s village believes that a woman married before her first menstrual cycle brings grace and honor to the entire family. She is considered pure. Financially too, this is of benefit.

In the case of Sekina, her bride price consisted of a herd of cattle, two locally distilled bottles of alcohol and a sewing machine. The cattle and drinks were for the family elders and the sewing machine for Sekina to learn a trade as a seamstress.

Sekina’s mother could not stop the marriage for fear of being ostracized by the family.

“It got to a point where they shouted insults on us every day, the pressure was just too much.”

Sekina had wanted to study to become a nurse. After her wedding, she realized she was one of her husband’s three wives.

Poverty – and in most cases, extreme poverty – and a lack of education contribute to this issue. The UNFPA identified 47% of women aged 20-24 with no education tied the knot by the age of 18 compared to 15% of women who had been educated up to secondary and university level.

“In most cases, they do not get the chance to even voice out their objections because the decision is already taken for them,” says Stephen Jones, founder of the Centre for Women Empowerment.

His outfit has set up a refuge in the Upper East region, where this trend is at the highest according to figures from UNFPA. The shelter currently has 30 girls who have run away from forced marriages to seek refuge here and gain skills.

Sekina is happy to be back with her mother but that happiness came at a cost.

“We have shamed the family and as a result we have been cast out by the elders. The only way to make it right is for Sekina to go back to her husband but I cannot force her to do something she hates,” says her mother. For Sekina, this has spelt a new beginning. She has enrolled in a community school and hopes her dream of becoming a nurse will one day come true.