One of the things you notice first about Memory Banda is her exuberance and infectious laugh. Dig a little deeper and you find the mettle that has characterised her work as an activist since the tender age of 13. When her peers where playing dress up, Memory was focused on why young girls in her community and close family members were dropping out of school and being pushed into early marriage. “I saw young girls that I was in school with, suddenly not in school anymore and the next thing you knew they were married with some falling pregnant when they were just children themselves.” This spurred Memory to start advocating for young girls in her community to have the opportunity to go to school and not be forced into an early marriage. Raised by a single mother, the value of a good education, especially for girls, was inculcated by her mother who took on a number of jobs to support her family.

ADVOCATING FOR AN END TO CHILD MARRIAGE

In 2015, the 18 year old Memory took the fight to end child marriage national. She was at the forefront of advocating for the Marriage, Divorce and Family Relations Act (Marriage Act) to be changed. Up until then, under Malawian law, girls as young as 15 years were allowed to marry. “We wanted girls to stay in school and at least complete their secondary education level, so we fought hard to push for the age to be raised to 18 years.” It was a massive victory for young girls across the country to have the right to choose education over forced marriage protected in law. Emboldened by the fact that important leaders had listened and taken her views onboard, Memory realised the power of advocacy and how used for good, it could change people’s lives and lived realities.

“That day I just knew that my life would always be one of service and activism.”

Memory was just getting started. In 2017, together with a group of other young activists she helped harmonise and rewrite the laws to remove a loophole for child marriage that existed through parental consent as one of the requirements for marriage. That meant that the only people who could give consent to marriage, was the two people who were getting married. “Parental consent was a big challenge, as parents were still pushing young girls into early marriages, even if they were not 18 years old, as the law change of 2015 had stipulated. By removing this consent, girls in my country were now in control of their choices and could better plan their futures.” It was a big deal and she firmly believes that these changes helped propel the country towards achieving some of its key development goals.

Through her work at Girls Empowerment Network (GENET) over the last few years, her focus has shifted to include sexual reproductive health rights (SRHR) as a fundamental right for girls and young women. Memory firmly believes that education, together with the right to access comprehensive sexual reproductive health services, is the cornerstone of building a better life and brighter future for young people, especially young girls. “There is a definite link between child marriage, girl’s education and sexual reproductive health rights. When girls are given more comprehensive information about sexual reproductive health they can make better decisions and this in turn leads to a decrease of teenage pregnancies and early marriages.” She however admits that aligning the policies to allow...
comprehensive sexual education to be offered to young people as part of the curriculum has been a challenge due to the misalignment of policies or legal requirements between the Gender and Education ministries. “But we won’t give up because we are fighting for girls’ futures here and when you empower a young girl, you empower a nation. That is what makes me get out of bed each morning, because I know that I can help make a difference. I believe that advocacy is not always done in a boardroom it can be done anywhere, I want to change the mindset about how we do advocacy in Africa.”

COVID-19 HAS REDUCED THE GAINS MADE

Turning to the Covid-19 pandemic and the impact that it has had on GENET’s work in the community, Memory shakes her head. “It has been quite devastating actually. When the government went into lockdown and restricted our movements to curb the spread of the virus, we were unable to continue our face to face work in the communities.” Between the March lockdown until the recent cessation of movement restrictions in July, GENET has had to rely on telephonic or social media to communicate with local group leaders. “We only had these platforms at our disposal to try to get a sense of the challenges that the community was facing, but more so what issues the young girls were dealing with.” However, nothing could prepare Memory for what she believes is a massive step backwards in rights and access for young girls. With the lockdown closing schools and the uncertainty of when schools will be reopening, many young people believe that the school year is over and are engaging in risky sexual behaviour. Combined with the restricted access to SRHR services, Memory says that this has led to a dramatic spike in unplanned teenage pregnancies. Worse still are the stories that young girls are sharing about being admonished as a burden to their families, while others report that their daily activities are now focused on household chores and working in the fields, with little attention or effort being given to catching up on missed school work. “What is most devastating is that some girls are now being forced into early marriage out of desperation.” Down the line, she believes that this will have a significant impact on the country’s social and economic development. “We are going to see more teenage pregnancies and fewer girls completing their schooling. And we are going to lose out on a generation of girls who challenge ideas and societal norms.” She is adamant that the programming focus on SRHR, child marriage and girls education must be prioritised by the donor and international community, otherwise the gains made by Malawi and other African countries will be all but eroded.

PLACING GIRLS AT THE CENTRE

In service of girls is an ethos that defines Memory’s approach to everything that she does. It is what led her to establish her own foundation, the Foundation4GirlsLeadership in 2019. “I wanted a platform that would help empower young girls to discover their passions and then gain the necessary skills and training to support their dreams.” The foundation focuses on providing SRHR services and improving access to inclusive education for girls, but believes that helping young girls to work on life skills, such as goal setting and helping to build their confidence and self-esteem is equally important.
As if she was not busy enough, Memory also launched her own talk show this year, Talk Daily Issues with Memory Banda. “The show is an open forum that I hope will provide a safe space for girls and young people to share what is on their mind, to challenge status quo and hopefully to come up with innovative and impactful solutions to their issues.” She hopes that the show will lead to greater public dialogues and help transform societal consciousness about the benefit of having a society that values girls and what they can offer. Currently shooting her first few episodes that will air soon, Memory is optimistic that when young girls see what is possible and can become anything they set their sights on, they will be the drivers of their destiny and creators of their future. She will be supporting them all the way.

Follow Memory on:
- Facebook: @Memory Vanessa Banda
- Twitter: @memorybanda75
- Instagram: @vbmemory

#FRIDAYYOUTHACTIVIST #SERVICE4GIRLS #SAT4YOUTH

Girls Empowerment Network (GENET) is a registered local young women’s rights organisation and a grassroots movement of girls that work to advance their rights, status and wellbeing. It is affiliated to Girls Not Brides and serves as Secretariat for GNB Malawi Southern Chapter.

Foundation4GirlsLeadership (F4GL) is an NGO registered in Malawi. The organisation was founded by Memory Banda a child right’s activist and campaigner against Child Marriage in Malawi. F4GL is dedicated to raising young girl leaders, promoting their rights and improving the access to inclusive education for young girls.

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