This week we are changing things slightly in our weekly showcase of the Adolescent Activism Awards (AAA) winners. The national winner for Malawi, was Tanaka Chirombo whose amazing story we published in July this year. Read his story here and you will see why he was selected as the AAA national winner in Malawi. This week, however, we feature another bright star in Malawi, Lusungu Harawa, who was awarded as the Runner Up in the SAT AAA competition.

Lusungu Harawa is a 23 year-old SRHR Activist and a social worker who is changing the lives of young adolescent girls in the Rumphi District of her home country, Malawi. “My passion is to lift up fellow young girls through my work in the community.” Having been recently recognised for her efforts, Lusungu was awarded as Runner Up in the national SAT Adolescent Activism Awards. The awards were the design of the SRHR Africa Trust, aimed at celebrating the achievements of young people in SRHR and HIV, Ending Child Marriage and Gender Based Violence advocacy. When asked how she felt when she was announced as one of the national finalists, Lusungu says, “I was actually on my way home when someone called and asked if I had seen the Facebook and WhatsApp group posts that I was one of the six finalists. It was such an honour to me, that I was being considered along with so many other worthy young activists, who themselves are doing admirable work in their communities.”

Community development, especially the development of young adolescent girls to reach their full potential as young women in society, is what motivates Lusungu. “I believe that girls have value, which they don’t often realise or see in themselves. Which is why I dedicate much of my work and time towards amplifying girl value as a core principle in my mentoring approach. I see so many young girls who are giving away their value, and trade sex in exchange for material things that they believe will give them value. Things, like nice clothes or jewelry, cellphones or having a nice place to stay. But this is short term and many end up with unwanted pregnancies and a future that looks very different from the one that they believed they were going to have.” School dropouts, teenage pregnancies, early child marriage, sexual gender-based violence and unsafe abortions are rife across Malawi. And it is no different in the communities of Rumphi urban, Bolero and Mwazisi in the Rumphi district, where Lusungu works as a Youth Hub Coordinator at the Life Concern Organisation. “Although poverty does play a large role in driving these behaviours and social ills, many times it is actually the lack of proper information and access to SRHR services that leads to so many problems for adolescents and young girls.” Ensuring that all stakeholders are playing their part to provide information and services that are easily accessible, meets the needs of young people and is offered without stigmatisation, is what drives Lusungu to participate in as many SRHR and youth community development platforms that she can. In fact, when we speak to her, she is participating in a review of the National Youth Friendly Health Services Strategy (2021 – 2025), taking place with various stakeholders in Mponela-Dowa in Malawi. “It’s vitally important that as young people we are able to raise our voices in these platforms, so that we can come together and develop something that is inclusive and really addresses the lived realities and challenges that adolescent girls and young people face when trying to access SRHR, HIV or GBV services. I am so excited to be raising these issues together with other representatives from across the country. We are
stronger when we come together with one goal in mind. The welfare and health of our country’s young people.” The meeting has brought together leading stakeholders including, the Family Planning Association of Malawi, the Reproductive Health department in the Ministry of Health, the Sexual Reproductive, the Health Services Alliance, Save the Children, the WHO, Youth Wave, the National Youth Network and Health Policy Plus.

Having seen so many young girls being pushed into early marriage in her community, it’s no wonder that working to get young girls out of early or forced marriage is another of Lusungu’s primary focus areas. In her role as an adolescent and young people team leader in the Nkhamanga and Mayembe wards, she has helped to mobilise and sensitise young people on the importance of staying in school and joining youth clubs where they are able to access information on sexual reproductive health and rights, as well as access SRHR and HIV and STI services. Through her efforts, Lusungu helped to uncover 83 school dropouts, 52 of these due to child marriages and teenage pregnancies. “I just knew that we had to get them help, so I reached out to the relevant authorities from social welfare, the Rumphi district hospital, as well as the education and judiciary, to seek their interventions for these young girls.” This was made possible through her work with the Task Force for Ending Child Marriages, which has a multi-sector approach and includes the District Education Manager, the District Officer in Charge for Police, the Director for District Planning and Development, the Court Magistrate, the local hospital department and the Tradition Authority, which importantly also involves the group village headmen. Through her continued efforts, 11 child marriages were terminated, 43 girls went back to school, of which 30 were in primary school and 13 in secondary school. Additionally, her organisation, supported 9 girls with school fees, while 4 were supported through government bursaries. “A big challenge is to get the support and buy-in from guardians, parents and foster parents of the girls. Many of them don’t fully comprehend the level of care and financial support that these young girls need when they return back to their homes.” This gap in the support needed, has Lusungu doing what she does best, she’s raising the drumbeat and amplifying the voices of the young girls and women she represents up to the highest levels in government and local communities to ensure that they incorporate these support networks and services into their plans and policies around ending child marriage.

“Our job as SRHR activists is to engage and inform young people, so that they realise that their rights and needs are important and they then themselves become the ones who create the demand for services in the areas where they live. Young people deserve to have access not just condoms, but the full spectrum of modern contraceptives. It’s their right to be able to access SRHR and HIV information in a youth-friendly and safe space like what we have at our youth clubs. Where they don’t experience judgement or stigmatisation and where they can talk to another young person who of the same age and has the same background and experiences.” Lusungu is also pushing for the YCBD (Young Community Distribution Agents) members to be allowed to distribute more than just the condoms they are able to right now and ensure that these members are the same age as the young people in the community that they serve. “I would like to see a set of criteria being set for the YCBDs, where there is a set age band so that they are not older than the community of young people they are serving.
We see many young people being too scared to get services or condoms because they are worried that the YCBDs will tell their parents and they will be stigmatised. Also, we have outlying and hard to reach places where our adolescents and young people have to walk long distances to access services and are not getting the necessary access to the full range of contraceptives. I am trying to see if there is a way that the YCBDs can thus provide the wider range of contraceptive services and not just the condoms that they currently provide. This will go a long way to preventing unplanned pregnancies and unsafe abortions.” Lusungu has started engaging with key stakeholders in the Rhumpi district, such as service providers from hospitals and local clinics to find ways to address these challenges.

Putting her financial winnings from the AAA competition to good use, Lusungu has already helped facilitate a training session with local SRHR youth club members from across the region. “We invited 2 representatives from each of the youth clubs to address key issues on SRHR information, access and policies that impact the lives of adolescents and young people. In the end we had 12 males and 13 females attending the training. Understanding the national policies that impact the health and wellness of Malawi’s young people is critical to activists being able to competently engage with local stakeholders. It also ensures that they know what rights young people in our country should have and then they are able to advocate effectively when they see those rights and access to services not being afforded to young people in their communities.” Lusungu is really proud that her work in Rhumpi as an activist and champion has been recognised. “I am even more motivated to continue my passion and I plan to ensure that every adolescent girl and young woman in my community is able to access the information and services they deserve, so that they are empowered to make informed decisions about their health and futures.”

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