Naomi Banda is pushing boundaries and breaking norms around early child marriage in Malawi. This 21 year-old activist says her work is in defiance of the patriarchy and long held traditions of child brides, that she has witnessed from an early age. The second born of four girls, she and her sisters were taken in by an Uncle when her mum passed when she was just 10 years old. Naomi admits that things could have gone horribly wrong for her and her siblings, had it not been for her forthrightness about her future education expectations and the valuable support of her Uncle.

Access to education for young girls across Africa, remains one of the single biggest barriers to achieving a brighter and more prosperous future. ‘Young girls education is often not prioritised by families, many of whom battle extreme poverty and end up having to make hard choices between continuing education and support for their daughters versus marrying off them off to another family who will become her guardians. While acknowledging the devastating impact extreme poverty in Malawi, Naomi still believes that the rights of young girls to enjoy all the benefits of education and empowerment, as is given to their brothers, is sacrosanct. “I have lived my life in opposition to the norms and the gender-stereotyping around girls in my country, where they are not considered as having the same value as a boy, or where their dreams and aspirations about their futures is seen as secondary to the needs of the whole family. Girls deserve a real chance to achieving their goals through higher education.” Having herself recently achieved a Bachelor of Science in Agronomy, Naomi uses her experience to inspire a new generation of girls who see what she has accomplished and are inspired to believe that anything is possible. Deciding that she wanted to leverage local platforms already in existence, she actively sought out NGOs like GNET (Girls Empowerment Network) that were working in her community so that she could use her talents and passion to give back through her community volunteer work. Indeed through her work she has supported 21 girls in her community with counselling services, the purchasing of basic school materials, as well as referrals to other local NGOs and stakeholders for additional support.

Changing the future trajectory of young women’s lives in her country is the end goal for Naomi and if she becomes known as the women who ended the scourge of child marriage in her country, this is the cherry on top she adds. When asked how this can be accomplished if it is so entrenched in such a patriarchal society, Naomi says that building coalitions across community stakeholders is key to success. Through this approach she and her fellow activists have worked at building strong relationships with Traditional Authorities, local police and other NGOs that are working towards ending child marriage. Critical to the coalition’s success is the relationships with the girl’s parents and the parents of the husband. As they are often the ones who will end up supporting the young girl who is leaving the marriage to return home, or where they ensure that if there are children from the marriage, that the husband plays his role to support his children.

Noami says, “It is important to show respect to the Traditional Authorities and headmen in the community. At the Traditional Authoriy Zilkoma in the Nthtaby district where I live, we shared with the leaders what the challenges were for young girls and women and why it is so important for them to be given the opportunity to complete their education before deciding for themselves if they want to enter into marriage.” In terms of how she and her follow
activists approach young girls who find themselves in unwanted marriages, she shares that they start by building relationships with them to build trust. This is then followed up with counselling sessions in safe spaces like the local girls clubs or even one on one counselling, whereby they can determine what challenges the young girl might be experiencing in her marriage. Her efforts have seen eight girls and young women being saved in her community, who are now back in school and progressing with their education.

Naomi has been told that she is seen as big role model to the young girls in her community, which is something that she seems to take quite seriously. She says, “I feel privileged to be a part of every girl’s story in my community. Here their voices, their worries, their challenges matter and they are able to safely share what challenges they are facing. Here we share with them the importance of accessing contraceptives and how to avoid early pregnancies, which can result in negatives consequences like early child marriage.” She believes that access to SRHR information and services is a fundamental right for every single girl and young woman in Malawi. Contraception holds the key to a young girl or woman being able to continue her education, plan her future and take control over her life and life decisions through informed decision-making.

As poverty is one of the drivers of early child marriage, being able to become economically independent is a way for young women to build their own future pathways. Naomi and her fellow community activists want to break the cycle of poverty by teaching young girls and women on different ways in which to become self-sufficient. Business activities include baking, knitting, hair braiding, making reusable sanitary pads for local use to name a few. “I want young women to capitalise on their talents and generate an income from these activities for themselves and their families. My hope is that these small businesses can then develop into fully fledged business that can allow women to become financially independent.” Naomi believes that this change is in reach. She is part of growing groundswell of young women leaders who standing up, taking charge and playing their part to change the lives and futures of girls and women in their country. #InDefiance

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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.