

PRESS RELEASE – AFRICAN CHILD TRUST

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Keeping girls in school: Tackling child marriage, teenage pregnancy and period poverty in Malawi

African Child Trust (ACT) has recently completed their Ulemu Project, a project aimed at addressing the high dropout rate of girls across two schools in Nyezerera community, Malawi. The need for the project first became apparent in 2014 when ACT were made aware that only 20% of the girls they were sponsoring through education in this area actually completed their studies. Upon reviewing this phenomenon, ACT noticed a vast correlation between girls entering puberty and female school dropout rates. From there on the project became focused on addressing the issues thrown up by puberty in a poverty-stricken area, namely inadequate menstrual health care, early age marriages and teenage pregnancy.

Across Africa, like much of the rest of the world, menstruation is somewhat of a taboo subject. However, unlike much of the rest of the world, girls across Africa do not have access to basic sanitation facilities and adequate sanitary-wear (pads, tampons etc). Considering this, it is hardly surprising that many girls miss several days of school at a time whilst they are menstruating. In a similar vein, whereas sex education forms part of the curriculum in the West, it does not in many African countries. Accordingly, teenage pregnancy is a real issue. Across Malawi in 2016, 43.6% of girls aged 15-19 were either pregnant or already teenage mothers. ⁱ

In the Chichewa language, 'Ulemu' means 'dignity'. This word completely encompasses what the project was about: granting girls the dignity they deserve by providing them with menstrual and sexual health education, thereby tackling the stigma. Through organised events called "Girl Showers", this project was implemented. At these events, girls and boys alike were educated about the importance of the aforementioned topics, alongside other significant topics including hygiene, sanitation, career planning and human rights. At the "Girl Showers", all 1,379 girls who attended received a "Blessing pack" containing underwear, re-useable sanitary pads and roll on deodorant. The event was also attended by the "Mother Group", a group of older women trained to make reusable sanitary pads and counsel girls on the issues threatening their future in education.

Mary Fazema of the "Mother Group" said:

"When this programme came, we learnt to sew. When we received the two sewing machines for our community we learnt how to sew pads and distributed them in the schools for our girls. We have learnt a lot from this programme. There are still so many to take part in this programme as we only have two sewing machines. We would like this project to continue to give more people the opportunity to take part".

Since undertaking the project, ACT has noticed a marked decline in the rate of girls dropping out of school compared to data from previous years. In 2016-17, 286 out of 1,683 girls dropped out of the two schools where the project was undertaken (66 due to pregnancy and 91 due to early marriage). Post Ulemu Project, these figures have decreased dramatically. Across 2017-18, 59 out of 1,764 of these girls dropped out of school (24 due to pregnancy and 13 due to early marriage). Overall, ACT is pleased with the progress that has been made since the project's inception. However, there is still a way to go. ACT would like to be involved in persuading the government to integrate menstrual and

sexual health education as a subject in the school curriculum in order to sustain these results. This, of course, necessitates both funding and awareness to bring this issue to the forefront of Malawian politics.

-Ends-

Note to editors:

Photos and videos from the implementation of the project are available upon request.

For all media requests, please contact claudia@africanchildtrust.org.uk or call 0208 688 0386.

Founded in 1999, African Child Trust is a UK registered charity that works in Africa to relieve poverty and advance development through the education of disadvantaged children and the financial empowerment of widows. It provides skills training and financial support across eight African countries; Uganda, Tanzania, Malawi, Zambia, Burkina Faso, Kenya, Democratic Republic of Congo and Nigeria.

Please visit <http://www.africanchildtrust.org.uk/> or email Claudia on the email address listed above for more information.

ⁱ Trading Economics: Malawi - Teenage pregnancy and motherhood
<https://tradingeconomics.com/malawi/teenage-pregnancy-and-motherhood-percent-of-women-ages-15-19-who-have-had-children-or-are-currently-pregnant-q1-lowest-wb-data.html>