



One of the Spotlight Initiative mentors, Laurence Nyirenda during a mentorship activity attended by programme partners and UN Resident Coordinator for Malawi, Ms. Maria Jose Torres Macho.

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UN Volunteers foster gender rights for girls in Malawi

Malawi is one of the eight countries implementing the multi-year partnership programme between the European Union and the United Nations focusing on gender-based violence prevention and management, dubbed the Spotlight Initiative (SI). The Spotlight Initiative aims to accelerate the elimination of violence against women and girls (VAWG), including sexual gender-based violence (SGBV) and harmful cultural practices (HP) in communities of Malawi. The initiative focuses on addressing the structural root causes of VAWG and their linkages to sexual reproductive health rights (SRHR).

In Malawi, [the Spotlight Initiative \(SI\)](#) was rolled out in 2019 and is being implemented jointly by the UN Development Programme (UNDP), the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) and UN Women in six districts: Nkhata Bay, Mzimba, Dowa, Ntchisi, Machinga and Nsanje.

One of the several but core interventions being implemented under this initiative is a mentorship programme named the Safe Spaces Model. Led by UNFPA, the programme aims to increase the capacity of community mentors as coaches for safe spaces where vulnerable girls can find support for sexual and reproductive health and gender-based violence services.

The intervention is implemented following the fourth outcome of the Spotlight Initiative — provision of quality services relating to GBV — and contributes to better provision of quality services through community capacity building initiatives, chiefly targeting young girls who are the right-bearers.

At the center of the programme is six national UN Volunteers serving with UNFPA as GBV Services Officers in each of the six targeted districts. Their role is to work with all UNFPA district-based partners, including relevant district council officers, and exercise technical advisory roles in all matters relating to the UNFPA portfolio, including coordinating the safe spaces component.

Diana Nyirenda and Fadress Nyirenda are two of the six UN Volunteers, serving as District Coordinator and GBV Services Officer respectively in Dowa district. Both Diana and Fadress explained that through the mentorship programme, safe spaces and social networks for girls had been created as platforms for sharing information relating to sexual and reproductive health rights, gender, leadership and life skills.

They further explained that the safe spaces model involves community leaders not only as opinion shapers but also as custodians of cultural practices, thereby transforming them into the most effective change agents.

According to Laurence Nyirenda, one of the mentors at Mtende in Traditional Authority (TA) Chindi in Mzimba, the results of the mentorship activity are enormous. “Young women are more vulnerable to early pregnancies and marriage, gender-based violence, HIV and complications arising from childbirth when they are uninformed about their choices,” she explained.

““ The mentorship programme is addressing the need for supportive coaching and learning by training young women to guide their peers on sensitive matters through the safe spaces.” -- Laurence Nyirenda, mentor at Mtende in Traditional Authority (TA) Chindi in Mzimba

She noted that because of the programme, girls are now able to speak out and challenge negative social norms that drive harmful practices, such as gender-based violence, child marriage and teenage pregnancy.

Since its introduction in 2019, a total of about 14,653 mentees, 435 mentors and 36 focal persons have been trained through the mentorship programme in the six participating districts.

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