

Change Starts With Us

Mama Cash grantee Girls Empowerment Network, Malawi

reflects on the ingredients for impact



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By Esther Vonk for Mama Cash
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Founded in 2008, the Girls Empowerment Network (GENET) Malawi is a feminist organisation and a grassroots movement of girls and young women who are passionate about making a difference in their society. GENET works to end traditional practices that are harmful for girls, such as early and forced marriage, denial of education, exclusion from participation in public life, rituals like sexual initiation, and other forms of violence against girls.

GENET focuses on strengthening and amplifying girls' and young women's voices by empowering them to be advocates for—and to claim—their rights. The organisation operates both at local and national levels, forming networks of girls and young women, developing leadership, providing public and civic education on girls' and women's rights, and engaging in advocacy. The group explains: "We want to engage every girl. We want every girl to know...about her rights, about this movement, about her agency. We want every girl to say no to early marriage. We want every girl to act." GENET received its first grant from Mama Cash in 2009.

The challenge

The practice of child marriage, particularly girl marriage, is widespread in Malawi. It is estimated that about 50% of girls in Malawi marry before the age of 18. Many parents

arrange marriage for their daughters because they feel it is in both the girls' best interest, as well as that of the family. Where poverty is acute, especially in rural areas, marrying off a daughter allows parents to reduce expenses. In communities where a bride price is paid, marriage provides a welcome source of income.

In addition to early, forced, or coerced marriage, the rights of girls in Malawi are frequently violated by other harmful traditional practices. For both economic and social reasons, many adolescent girls leave school early: their education is not considered important and marriage is seen as the ultimate goal for them. They also face the risk of violence in school. Prior to the founding of GENET, these issues, while on the development agenda, were not being addressed by girls and young women themselves. Girls, echoing the beliefs of their communities, did not know their rights and were not collectively resisting rights violations.

Learning to be 'bad girls' if we need to

In just a short time, GENET has succeeded in bringing about major changes in the lives and rights of girls, especially at the community level. In 2009, GENET had some 300 members. Since then, it has grown exponentially with almost 5,000 girl members organised in 120 villages in 16 Traditional Authorities in eight districts of Malawi. "Girls are eager to join. They learn about GENET and what we are doing . . . the change we want to make. Girls are ready to stand up for themselves." Each of the girl networks has 20-40 members who, in turn, organise girls in the villages. This means there's a high level of mobilisation and organisation amongst girls.

"A lot has changed. Especially for the girls participating in the networks and our programmes. Girls' mindsets, their own values have changed. I have rights. I can say no. I can choose. Girls have unlearned to be obedient. They are learning to ask questions. To express

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what they want. To talk back. We are learning to be ‘bad girls’ if we need to. Girls developed a voice. Then they developed a collective voice, a public voice. Girls speak out in public. That’s a huge change—for the girls themselves, and for the community and the leadership.”

GENET also developed support structures in the communities where it works and where girls’ networks are active. It ensures that girls have someone to turn to when their rights are violated, for example when their families want to coerce them into marriage or when they are not allowed to stay in school. Village committees and young women leaders in each Traditional Authority monitor violence and rights violations, and are the point persons for girls to turn to if they need mediation in negotiating with their families or school, or if they want to report violations of their rights.

The girl networks are a powerful support system. GENET has many stories of girls ‘rescuing’ each other: a girl reporting to the group that her parents want to marry her off, the group taking action by providing shelter and, with the support of GENET staff, reporting the case to local authorities. Many girls GENET has supported in preventing or exiting a marriage go back to school. While GENET lacks the financial means to support rescued child brides or teen mothers, it connects girls to the Campaign for Female Education (CamFEd) and the Ministry of Gender and Social Affairs, both of which provide scholarships for girls.

In 2013 GENET also started organising boys networks. “Boys started calling for it – they learned about what girls were doing, and wanted to learn the same. They wanted to be involved. There are 20 such local networks so far. The groups address masculinity, gender, gender roles. They talk about what girls’ rights are. We focus on girl education and empowerment. But when boys started asking to be engaged we saw the opportunity. Boys also need education.

And they want to be involved in the change.”

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As a result of GENET’s efforts, child marriage is increasingly seen as unacceptable. Girls themselves and, increasingly, their parents, village leaders, and

the community understand it as violence and a violation of girls’ rights. In 70% of the communities where GENET is actively lobbying and mobilising, traditional leaders and police are supportive of the group’s work: local by-laws have been changed to outlaw harmful traditional practices, including child marriage, ‘sexual cleansing’ and other rituals violating girls. Some villages have also adopted clauses on the right of girls to education.

From local mindsets to national policy

GENET also advocates for policy and legislative change at the national level. Earlier this year GENET achieved a significant victory when the National Assembly enacted the Marriage Act, raising the minimum age for girls to marry from 15 to 18. Similarly, a new law on Trafficking in Persons was adopted to protect girls from human trafficking and from being forced into prostitution or marriage.

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Passage of these laws was a result of GENET’s vigorous work at both the local and national levels. “We did our homework, preparing the ground to change minds and practices

at the local level. We fought tooth and nail until the Marriage Bill was passed into law.” GENET has learned that it is necessary to work for change on all levels: girls need to learn, be educated, and know their rights in order to be able to stand up. They need to develop their own communities, support structures, and a collective voice in order to be heard, to be powerful. They also need to build support among others in their communities—leaders, families, and teachers need to recognise girls’ rights. Finally, girls need the justice system, local and national laws, to recognise their rights.

When the President of the Republic of Malawi committed in 2012 to addressing the minimum age of marriage, GENET sought to ensure that girls were at the decision-making table and their voices were heard by government representatives, for example in the Technical Working Group on Gender-Based Violence and

governmental debates on the Marriage Act. GENET also brought attention to girls voices in its publication, *I will marry when I want to*. “How can the girls, whose lives these laws are drafted to help, benefit from them if they are not consulted?,” GENET explains.

Since passage of the Marriage Act, GENET and other allies are now advocating for an amendment to the Malawian Constitution, which still recognises marriage of 15, 16 and 17 year-olds with parental consent. “Now we have a huge task to create awareness of the new Act so that it is not just on paper but should be enforced and change and improve the lives of girls and young women.”

GENET has benefited significantly from its participation in the Girls Not Brides Network. GENET hosts the secretariat for Girls not Brides Malawi and engages in joint strategising and advocacy with partners in the network. GENET is also helping to shape UN Women’s agenda around ending child marriage, among other issues. GENET’s coordinator is an elected member of UN Women’s Civil Society Advisory Committee in Malawi.

Professional strength

When Mama Cash began supporting GENET in 2009 its annual budget was some €40,000. Within a few years, its budget had more than tripled and its donor base had grown to include several international donors. “When anyone talks about girls in Malawi, everyone knows to turn to GENET. Nationally as well as internationally. Girls know us and find us, media finds us, the government finds us and includes us in its committees and policy processes. We have built international networks. And donors know where to find us. Girls’ rights are important, and we show that we make change. Donors see that, and want to support our work, and the growth of our work.”

Since its first grant from Mama Cash GENET has grown to a paid staff of eight, mostly young women under 25. It also has 12 ‘staff volunteers,’ positions filled by young women

interns who have just graduated from college. They are eager to gain work experience and are extremely important for GENET, as they add to the organisation’s strength and sustainability: “Many donors want to fund activities, not much staff costs. So this is a solution.”

Besides ‘staff volunteers,’ GENET also has 120 trained volunteer community leaders, young women who are responsible for connecting and organising girls and young women and doing advocacy on the local level. They lead the local girls’ networks, monitor violence against girls, and have a watchdog function in the community. They do follow-up: for instance if there’s a rape case – they report to GENET, to the child protection office in the community, and provide support to the girl. They collect data and document cases. If GENET organises outreach they coordinate with the traditional leaders. They mobilise girls in the community and organise the weekly meetings. And, importantly, they share back their information to the GENET network.

Originally, there was no adolescent girl representation on GENET’s board. In 2013, GENET held a girls conference and a six-member adolescent girls advisory board was elected. Two of the girls became part of the GENET Board. “They bring girls’ voices directly to the board. It is empowering for girls, and for GENET. It helps us to really be on top of issues. And girls, even more than before, know now that GENET is theirs. It’s ownership.” In that same year, GENET also developed its first strategic plan in a participatory process involving staff and volunteers, girl representatives from different communities, and the board. GENET sees this process and the strategic plan that resulted from it as a key contributor to its professional strength and its effectiveness in achieving its goals.

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The Role of Mama Cash

Mama Cash has provided GENET with core support since 2009. “Mama Cash’s support has been key in our development and success. It has helped us grow as an organisation—in numbers, in positioning our issues, in accessing other sources of funding, in achieving what we

have achieved. . . . Mama Cash has shared information about other donors and has provided endorsements. This has helped us access other funding. Mama Cash also introduced us to other young women's organisations in the region." Especially the relationship with MEMPROW in Uganda has been important. Representatives of the two groups met at the 'Reframing and ending violence' Mama Cash grantee meeting organised in August 2012 in Nairobi. The groups maintain contact and in January 2013 GENET members participated in MEMPROW's Young Feminist Forum to exchange learning and strategies for movement building and advocacy, and to engage with other young women in strategising about amplifying the voices of young women in existing feminist movements, and building a young feminist movement across the African continent.

GENET has also valued Mama Cash's capacity building support. It was Mama Cash who first raised the question of girl representation in GENET's board. GENET ultimately restructured its governance to become both more representative and more effective. "[Mama Cash] helped us think about the organisation and where we are heading . . . about staffing, about our board, about the importance of having girls in our leadership, also at the board level. [Mama Cash] initiated the idea of developing a strategic plan. The exercise—and the opportunity to do it as a group process—has been immensely useful for us and a clear plan came out which helps us guide our work, and helps in presenting ourselves towards other donors and allies."

From 2009 to 2015, GENET received a total €98.000 from Mama Cash.

[This story of change is based on documents GENET submitted as part of Mama Cash's monitoring and evaluation during the grant periods; the organisation's annual reports; progress review conversations conducted over skype; and interviews with Faith Phiri of GENET. All quotes are Faith's. The original case study was researched and compiled by Esther Vonk.]



**ma
ma
cash**

(she changes the world)

Mama Cash
PO Box 15686
1001 ND Amsterdam
The Netherlands

T +31 (0)20 515 87 00
F +31 (0)20 515 87 99
E info@mamacash.org
I www.mamacash.org /
www.mamacash.nl

Bank: IBAN NL58INGB0000000528



twitter.com/mamacash



www.facebook.com/mamacashfund
