

November 2010

COWLHA



*Fighting Gender Based
Violence, Stigma
and Discrimination
stepping stones way*



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**UNIVERSAL ACCESS
for WOMEN and GIRLS NOW!**

News Update

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VISION STATEMENT

A society where girls and women living with HIV lead a healthy life, are empowered, self-reliant and their rights are fully respected, protected and fulfilled.

MISSION STATEMENT

COWLHA, a membership coalition of women and girls living with HIV and AIDS, seeks to enable its members lead a productive life by promoting sustainable livelihood programmes and strengthening their capacity to effectively lobby and advocate for issues affecting their lives.

VALUES OF COWLHA

In all its undertakings COWLHA is guided by:

- *Commitment of its members*
- *Professionalism in all its activities*
- *Love and respect for all people regardless of their HIV status*
- *Being transparent and accountable in all its undertakings*

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES OF COWLHA

COWLHA is guided by the following objectives to achieve its mission and vision:

- To encourage and support women living with HIV and AIDS in the formation and development of self Help groups and networks*
- To ensure that women and girls living with HIV and AIDS have accessible and affordable health care.*
- To ensure that up-to-date information concerning all issues about women and girls living with HIV and AIDS is easily and freely available to all its members*
- To ensure that women and girls' sexual reproductive health rights are respected and protected.*
- To solicit funds for the economic empowerment of women and girls living with HIV and AIDS to enable them to be self sufficient and independent*
- To demand that women living with HIV and AIDS be included in decision making processes and consultation at all levels of policy and programmes*
- To train and educate health care providers and community at large about the risks women face*

PROGRAMME AREAS

Women's Rights are deemed to be a very key component in realizing COWLHA's vision. Hence, advocacy is a key strategy that cuts across all the Programme Areas while gender as a crosscutting issue is mainstreamed in all the programme areas.

The following are the Programme Areas of COWLHA:

- 1. Sustainable Livelihoods Programme**
- 2. HIV and AIDS Programme**
- 3. Women's Rights Programme**
- 4. Capacity Building for COWLHA**

SPECIFIC ACTIVITIES

- *Advocacy sessions*
- *Capacity building of members on topical issues*
- *Research*
- *Community mobilisation*
- *Networking*
- *Civic education*

Foreword

For a long time, Malawian women have been on the bad side with HIV and AIDS hitting them hard, yet they play a vital role in the socio-economic development of this country.

It is a well known fact that women are the most at risk population as far as HIV and AIDS is concerned. HIV infection rates clearly manifest that women are more vulnerable than men

The issue of gender comes into play considering the fact that gender imbalances are mainly responsible for the spread of HIV and AIDS.

For instance men have access to financial resources than women which translates to high poverty levels amongst women.

It is in this context that that the Coalition of Women Living with HIV and AIDS (COWLHA) was established in 2006.

COWLHA is a Malawian Civil Society network that was conceived in 2006 to create a united voice of women and girls living with HIV and AIDS in addressing the challenges affecting them.

It is a grouping of diverse independent and voluntary organization, networks and individuals.

The grouping among other things unites different groups of women as a civil society force in their common pursuit of dealing with issues of HIV and AIDS and its impact in Malawi.

Currently COWLHA is working national wide through advocacy, campaigns, lobbying, research, civic education, capacity building, and resource mobilization. In addition the coalition is achieving its work through regional and district committees established in Malawi through support groups at community level.

In 2007, COWLHA received a grant from Cordaid, based in the Netherlands through Action AID Malawi to implement a campaign on violence against women living with HIV and AIDS in Malawi.

In 2009 COWLHA received technical and financial support from UNAIDS and UNFPA to implement a gender based violence project worth \$69,000 on pilot basis.

To scale up the pilot project, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) also pumped in some \$120,000 to assist the coalition implement violence against women project with technical support from

UNAIDS and UNFPA. This is one of the innovative projects that is using stepping stones as a way of training the beneficiaries in eight districts namely Chitipa, Mzimba, Lilongwe, Mchinji, Ntcheu, Machinga, Zomba and Phalombe.

A British donor agency, the Department for International Development (DfID) through One World Action is also in the fray to address challenges women living with HIV and AIDS are facing in the country by financing COWLHA on a project.

Steven Iphani

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Background to COWLHA AU NOW! project

Malawi has a generalized HIV epidemic with a prevalence rate of approximately 12%. However, HIV infection rates show gender, age, social status and geographical variations.

Of interest to COWLHA are the aspects of gender and social status of women in relation to HIV and AIDS because the feminization of HIV and AIDS in the country has become evident due to the fact that women account for around 58% of overall HIV infections (National HIV Prevention Strategy, 2009-2013) out of an estimated 930,000 people are living with HIV in Malawi (UNAIDS Report on the Global AIDS epidemic, 2008).

There are a number of factors that continue to make women more vulnerable to HIV than their male counterparts in Malawi. First, Malawi remains a patriarchal society in which women have fewer social rights than men. Among the impacts of such gender inequality is gender based violence or in our interest, violence against women. Violence against women resulting from social inequalities often leaves women with little choice to put their own lives at risk when faced with situations in which their rights are violated. For example, women living with HIV, who are members of COWLHA often, complain that they are not able to practice positive prevention because some of their husbands refuse to use condoms even with full knowledge of the risks of such practices. Hence, due to the fact that women are socialized to be submissive to men and are often economically dependent on their husbands, they end up giving in to such demands from their husbands at

the expense of their own health. That is why, as the Women Won't Wait Campaign notes "the lack of respect for women's rights both fuels the epidemic and exacerbates its impact" (Women Won't Wait Campaign; Show us the Money: Is Violence against Women on the HIV & AIDS Donor Agenda? 2007). Therefore, COWLHA deems it is necessary to address the human rights violations that women face as a way of mitigating the impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic on women in Malawi.

Secondly, Malawi has certain cultural practices that continue to violate women's rights and make them more vulnerable to HIV. Again, the cultural practices tend to violate the rights of women because of the patriarchy that continues to exist in the social fabric of Malawi. Examples of such practices include wife inheritance, gang raping of women during initiation ceremonies as well as culturally endorsed notions of masculinity that tend to promote multiple and concurrent sexual partnerships for men while at the same time restricting women to their husbands. As a result, COWLHA finds it imperative to continue addressing the challenges that arise from cultural practices that make women more vulnerable to HIV.

Thirdly, though strides have been made towards reducing HIV related stigma and discrimination twenty-five years after the first HIV case was diagnosed in Malawi, HIV and AIDS-related stigma and discrimination continue to hamper impact mitigation efforts that are being made. Women living with HIV and AIDS in Malawi continue to experience verbal attacks, social isolation, and discrimination in access to social welfare resources such

as government fertilizer subsidies, food-for-work and cash-for-work public works programs, and microcredit loans because they are perceived to be "useless, weak and already dead" (We will Still Live: Confronting Stigma and Discrimination against Women Living with HIV in Malawi, 2007). As such, it is important to continue sensitizing communities on facts about HIV and AIDS to further reduce stigma and discrimination and make the lives of people living with HIV better towards accessing care and support services.

The COWLHA UA Now! Project builds on an earlier project supported by UNAIDS Programme Acceleration Funds through UNFPA at addressing gender based violence in the overall fight against HIV and AIDS in 6 districts across Malawi from January to December 2009 on pilot basis using the Stepping Stones methodology. The overall aim of the project is to improve women's access and adherence to ARV treatment and reproductive health services by building the capacity of women living with HIV and AIDS as well as their partners to fight gender based violence and HIV/AIDS related stigma and discrimination within their communities. The Stepping Stones methodology is being used because it was found to be effective in the pilot project towards reducing partner based violence. In addition, the project is also engaging traditional leaders on issues of harmful cultural practices as well as HIV related stigma and discrimination to ensure that there is a conducive environment for people living with HIV to accessing HIV related care and support in their communities.

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LILONGWE DISTRICT

Stigma and discrimination continues to affect the fight against HIV/AIDS pandemic in the country. People living with HIV fear to be ridiculed and rejected when they disclose their status and end up being silent.

A member of Umodzi Support Group in Lilongwe, Enita Jailosi agrees that stigma and discrimination remains a hurdle in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

Jailosi was abandoned by her husband after she revealed to him that she was diagnosed to have HIV.

“After being found HIV positive, my husband left me. It was a painful experience,” recalls Jailosi.

But when support group members were informed of the objectives of stepping stones, they invited Enita’s husband to be part of the training to which he accepted.

He was counseled and convinced that the best option for him was to go for HIV testing and not walking away from his wife. His results revealed that he was HIV positive.

“My husband was living in denial and stepping stones helped him to rediscover himself and he apologized to me for leaving me,” says Jailosi.

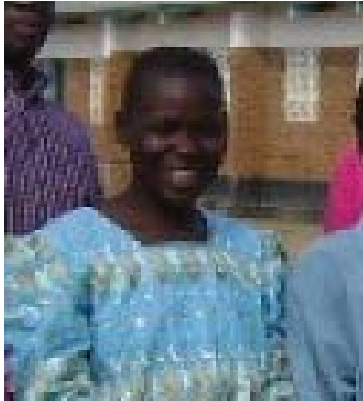
Since that incident the family has reunited and everyday they encourage each other the importance of communication and understanding in marriage according to Jailosi.

Benadeta Elias is another member of Umodzi support group who has faced the pangs of stigma and discrimination from someone she treasured most, mother.

“When I revealed my HIV status to my mother my expectations were that she will understand and give a shoulder to lean on,” says Elias.

To the contrary, the mother was angry and devastated with the news to the extent that Elias was disowned. Umodzi Support Group members became a source of encouragement and inspiration.

Fighting stigma and discrimination stepping stones way



Benadeta has faced the pangs of stigma:



Sipeka: Stepping stones has assisted me to handle stigma

“My husband was living in denial and stepping stones helped him to rediscover himself and he apologized to me for leaving me,”

The group’s chairperson Stivelia Sipeka says stepping stones participatory methodologies assisted her to handle the issue.

“We explained to Elias’s mum about the effects of what she was doing to her daughter and the evils of stigma and discrimination,” says Sipeka

The mother realized that it was wrong to discriminate against her daughter on the basis of being diagnosed HIV positive.

The enlightenment of my support group led to the enlightenment of my mother and in the end happiness has found place within my heart,” says Elias with a smile.

In Ntcheu district, community trainings and community dialogue

meetings are used to fight stigma and discrimination.

Linengwe Support Group is a shining example of a group that has made strides after following stepping stones methodologies.

The group’s membership was at 11 before accessing information from COWHLA within a short period the membership increased to 42.

Members of the support group says many people were reluctant to join the group because of high levels of stigma and discrimination in their communities.

With good support people living with HIV are likely to contribute effectively to the development of the country.



Maximo (first from left) posing for a photo with her colleagues from Ntcheu

Ntcheu lady grateful to the Universal Access Now project

NTCHEU DISTRICT

Maxima Lazaro is a 42 year old woman who became a member of Titani support group after stepping stones was introduced in her community through the support group.

Maxima used to fall sick regularly before the training was introduced and she did not know her sero status because she was afraid of going for an HIV test because she did not know how she would take the results if they turned out positive. But after the stepping stones community dialogue meeting, she decided to go for an HIV test and the results indicated that she has HIV.

She received advice from the health facility she visited on how to live positively with HIV after which she was put on ART. The health of Maxima has since improved because she has not fallen ill since she started receiving ARVs in July 2010.

Maxima is grateful to the Universal Access Now project for helping her to access care and support that has physical and psychological wellbeing. The major challenge that she faces is that she has to travel for 15km to get to the nearest clinic that administers ART.

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Stepping stones saves marriages

MCHINJI DISTRICT

Magret Elephala is married and lives positively with HIV. She joined Chikondi Support Group in Mchinji immediately after testing HIV positive few years ago.

Elephala says at some point her marriage was on the verge of collapsing due to the unfaithfulness of the husband.

"I used to refuse my husband sex because he was sleeping around with other women," recalls Elephala.

She says despite involving marriage counsellors and traditional leaders to bring sanity in the home it was all in vain as the root

cause was not found.

But life changed for the better when the couple attended stepping

stones training organized by Coalition of Women Living with HIV/AIDS in Malawi (COWLHA).

Elephala and husband discovered that lack of communication in the home made the husband to be involved in extra marital affairs.

"We had home work when we came back from the training. We could sit and openly discuss issues affecting our married life," says

"We had home work when we came back from the training. We could sit and openly discuss issues affecting our married life,"

Elephala.

Another couple Masautso and Loveness Nkhoma from Chisomo

Support Group in T/A Mavwere's area in the same district says lessons learnt from stepping stones have revived their fading love.

According to Loveness the husband (Masautso) used to refuse to use a condom saying it is his conjugal right.

"Lack of negotiating skills made me to accept the situation despite knowing that it was risky as we are both HIV positive," says Loveness.

Masautso acknowledges that stepping stones has helped him to understand the importance of condom use as well as respecting the sexual reproductive health rights of his wives.

"The project enlightened me on good sexual practices, couple communication and human rights," Masautso.

Today, happiness has returned in the Nkhoma's and Elephala homes courtesy of stepping stones and both can now afford a smile.



Chingwalu: My husband and I have agreed that we will not have any more kids

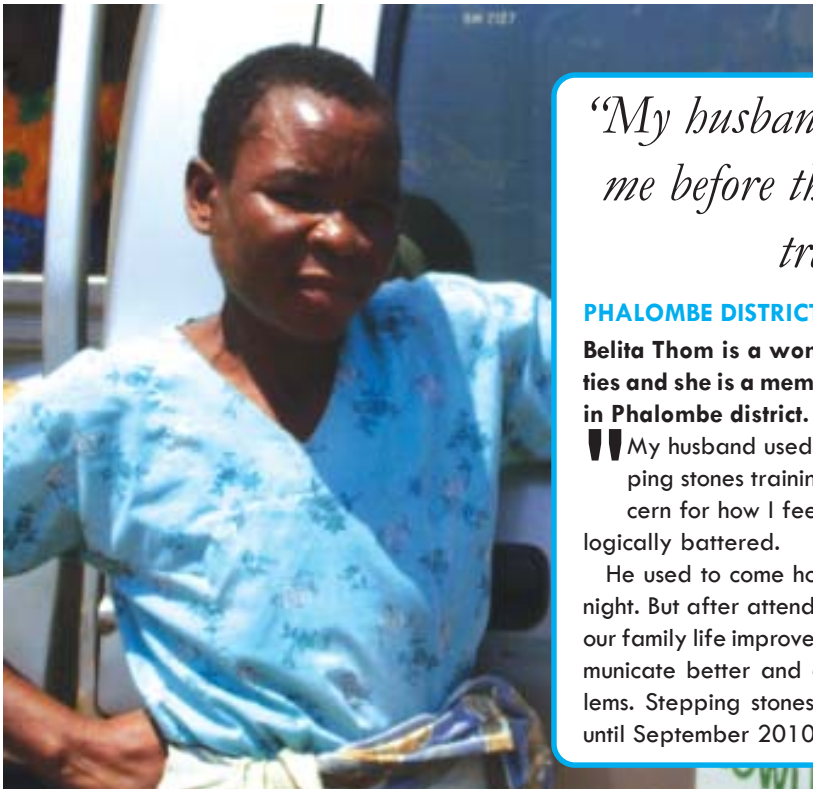
"We are happily married again"

Flora Chingwalu is a 38 year old member and chairperson of Talandira support group.

Flora had this to say about what the project has done for her: "before the stepping stones training for our support group, my husband was forcing me to bear another child against my will by insisting on unprotected sex.

This made our marriage reach a breaking point because we always argued over having another baby. But after we both attended the stepping stones training my husband began to understand that he does not need to force me to have another child against my wish because it is a form of gender based violence.

As a result, my husband and I have agreed that we will not have any more kids in addition to the ones that we have. My husband and I are happily married again and we are enjoying a great sex life because we no longer argue."



“My husband used to cheat on me before the stepping stones training”

PHALOMBE DISTRICT

Belita Thom is a woman living with HIV in her forties and she is a member of Talandira support group in Phalombe district. Belita had this to say:

▼▼ My husband used to cheat on me before the stepping stones training and he never showed any concern for how I feel or think which left me psychologically battered.

He used to come home very late, usually after midnight. But after attending the stepping stones training, our family life improved because we were able to communicate better and discuss the causes of our problems. Stepping stones made us have a great family until September 2010 when my husband died”.

Thom: Our family life improved

Handling gender based violence

PHALOMBE DISTRICT

Christina Mungomo is a 42 year old stepping stones community facilitator from Talandira Community Based Organisation in Phalombe district.

Since becoming a facilitator, she has trained members of her support group and she has now become a key person in helping community members to sort out their violence related family differences.

She initially successfully helped one couple that was a breeding ground for gender based violence to resolve their difference using the stepping stones approach.

But since then, cases of gender based violence from surrounding villages have been referred to her for assistance following her success in facilitating the resolution of the challenges of the first couple she handled.

As of October 2010, she had successfully helped 16 couples from her community to resolve their gender based violence problems.



Mungomo helped one couple that was breeding ground for gender based violence



Members of Nthumbo support group

Village Head fines two men for calling people living with HIV names

NTCHEU DISTRICT

Nthumbo support group is a major beneficiary of the stepping stone project as far as stigma and discrimination is concerned.

During the national workshop with traditional leaders, it was agreed that the leaders would take a leading role in reducing stigma and discrimination against people living with HIV in their communities.

As a result of this agreement, Group Village Headman Folotiya of Ntcheu district fined two men from his village to pay a goat and a chicken each for calling people living with HIV 'sick and dead people'.

The two goats were given to the support group of the area while the two chickens remained with the chief. In addition to the conviction of the two wrong doers in a tradition court, the chief also appointed a Mr Kadewere, who is man living with HIV to be the secretary of his village committee to demonstrate that stigma and discrimination is reducing in this particular area as an impact of the project.

Family re-unites after stepping stones training

NTCHEU DISTRICT

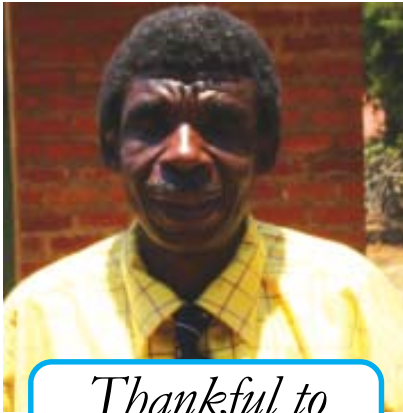
Maligeni Chithyolo is a COWLHA member in her thirties and is a member of Mphepozinyai support group in Ntcheu district. Margret was deserted by her husband some months before the stepping stones training in her community because she revealed her sero status to the husband after going for HTC and testing HIV reactive.

Members of Mphepozinyai support group ensured that both Maligeni and her run-

away husband attended the stepping stones training of their community because they were concerned with the way Maligeni's health was deteriorating as a result of the abandonment by her husband. Immediately after the community stepping stones training of their support group Maligeni's husband moved in back with her and they have since built a house in which they are happily living as a couple.

In addition to Maligeni's story, the

support group has developed a strong linkage with traditional leaders in the area who now attend support group activities on invitation to address issues of concern raised by PLHIV that require the leaders' intervention. This linkage has made the traditional leaders agents of positive change in denouncing stigma and discrimination during community meetings.



STEPPING STONES: *Stepping Up Eradication of Gender Based Violence & Discrimination*

Thankful to stepping stones for saving his marriage

ZOMBA DISTRICT

Mr. Paulo Yohane is a sixty year old man who is a member of Namikango support group in Zomba district. He is thankful to stepping stones for saving his marriage which was hitting the rocks.

Mr. Yohane and his wife are a discordant couple. Mr. Yohane tested HIV positive while his wife tested negative. Before the training, the wife always insisted on unprotected sex because she insisted that they always had sex without condoms and that she as ready to contract HIV from the man she has always loved.

This made Paulo very uncomfortable because he always wanted his wife to be protected from contracting HIV.

As such, he avoided having sex with his wife who felt that she was being denied of her conjugal rights.

But after they both attended the stepping stones training, the wife understood the importance of condom use in their family and they now use condoms every time they have sex. Paulo is grateful to stepping stones for saving his marriage from collapsing and for helping him protect the life of his wife.

It is around half past five in the evening and villagers in the area of Traditional Authority Kawinga in Machinga district are excited that another day is gone and a new day is in the offing.

This is the time most families prepare and take supper while sharing the day's experiences around fires and verandas.

But for Mary Banda (not real name) expectations of a new day mean the beginning of another day that will be characterized by hussles.

Sitting legs crossed and chin in the palm her thought are lost in the dreadful reality that she will again be subjected to all sorts of gender based violence once her husband returns home.

If her drunken husband will not shout at her about her ugliness and her HIV+ status then she will experience marital rape and thereafter ridiculed that she is not a good performer in bed.

But inwardly Mary complains that despite being married for seven years and bearing four children sex life has never been exciting.

"What happens in the house is always 'rape'. There is no foreplay and as and I have never reached orgasm stage during sex," Mary says.

This is why over the years she has been pondering on how she can share this with colleagues and get some advice.

But as luck would have it, one day her friend told her about the out spoken **stepping stones**, courtesy of the Coalition of Women Living with HIV and AIDS – COWLHA.

When Mary learnt all about stepping stones she found courage to discuss her problems with her husband who did not want to be part of the stepping stones community training.

"It was hard for my husband to understand importance of good communication and that as a wife I have rights," recalls Mary.

Gradually he stopped abusing Mary as he attended more stepping stones gatherings. Today, Mary can now smile and share what stepping stones has done for her.

COWLHA was established in 2006 to create a united voice of women and girls living with HIV and AIDS in addressing the challenges affecting them.

Stepping stones is a methodology which COWLHA has devised to fight gender based violence, stigma and discrimination in communities through discussions.

Sarah Kanthiti, one of the COWLHA women from Mchinji who underwent Stepping Stones training says stepping stones methodology has brought openness in homes..

"Through stepping stones, husbands and wives have discussed issues of sex with an open mind enhancing the mentality of communication and understanding," says Kanthiti.

According to Kanthiti some of the issues couples discuss include the need to enhance interaction during sex and the use of condoms for HIV infected couples, gender violence and condemnation of discrimination of people living with HIV.

The couples openly discuss issues of some bad cultural practices in their communities which are contributing to the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Stepping stones has made strides in Mchinji and Machinga where some cultural practices in communities lead to the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Bulangete la amfumu (Chief's 'blanket') is one of the bad cultural practices >>>> that have been identified in Mchinji courtesy of stepping stones.



Participants of the local leaders advocacy workshops

Traditional leaders are custodians of culture in different communities. Subjects look up to the leaders for guidance in issues that affect their daily lives.

Due to the nature of their work, traditional leaders deal directly with people who have diverse conditions and backgrounds. People living with HIV/AIDS form part of the community in which chiefs work.

Coalition of Women Living with HIV/AIDS in Malawi (COWLHA) recently organized a traditional leaders meeting aimed at sharing and exploring issues that affect people living with HIV.

During the meeting traditional leaders roles and responsibilities on people living with HIV were discussed.

The local leaders said there are some issues that are difficult to handle. For instance, some people expect

traditional leaders to distribute food to the needy, provide transport to people living with HIV and providing subsidy fertilizer.

Despite facing the challenges the leaders organize community sensitization meeting to explain to their subjects the role of chiefs.

Francewell Phiri, a consultant facilitator at the meeting said a good working relationship between COWLA and traditional leaders can help to reduce the challenges that people living with the virus are facing.

COWLHA work involves sensitizing people on HIV issues, creating a culture of self reliance for women members, sensitizing women and combating stigma and discrimination,

In addition, deals with issues involving gender-based violence and helps women with skills in order to forge ahead in life.

According to the organisation's Acting National Coordinator COWLHA Steven Iphani, membership is about 15,000 since establishment in 2006.

Traditional leaders, COWLHA bang heads

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STEPPING STONES: Stepping Up Eradication of Gender Based Violence & Discrimination

COWLHA women are working on ways to advocate for abolishment of such practices as it enhances the spread of HIV/AIDS.

In this practice villagers are compelled to provide a girl to any visiting chief for sex as a matter of thanking the chief for the visit.

Another cultural practice is Kusasa fumbi (dust removing); this has been identified in Machinga. In this practice elders in the village arrange people to have sex with children who have just come from initiation ceremonies so that they should be cleansed.

The practices have drastically gone down in the areas due to the implementation of stepping stones project in

conjunction with chiefs.

"Through stepping stones we have voiced out our concerns on a number of abuses that husbands inflict on us," says Miriam Patel, one of the TOTs in Machinga.

Patel says following stepping stones methodology communication has been improved thereby reducing discrimination and gender violence.

COWLHA started implementing the stepping stones in January 2010 with funding from UNDP and technical support from UNAIDS and UNFPA. The project is being implemented in eight districts of Malawi, namely: Chitipa, Mzimba, Lilongwe, Mchinji, Ntcheu, Machinga, Zomba and Phalombe. **By Chikondi Kampani**

Mzimba women learn effective communication

But through stepping stones training I have been enlightened on best ways of effectively communicating with my husband and eventually ask for family basic needs,”

MZIMBA DISTRICT

Judith Mkandawire from Mzimba is one of the beneficiaries of stepping stones training. She testifies that the project has been an important tool and catalyst for her personal as well as social development.

“Firstly I was jittery to ask for basic needs like food, clothes, money for the family-from my husband. I was afraid of not listening to and shouted at. I could just wait for my husband to provide without my news on how much money is needed and how much it will be spent in the family. But through stepping stones training I have been enlightened on best ways of effectively communicating with my husband and eventually ask for family basic needs,”

Secondly, Mkandawire said stepping stones has helped her to understand and shape her social behavior saying: “In an acceptable manner, I can now understand how to properly interact and adapt quickly with peers, work groups and strangers. Through such interventions, stepping stones has helped me discuss and share both positive and negative life experiences.”

Another Mzimba based Teleza Ngwira said she too has benefitted a lot from a series of stepping stones workshops that she had participated in.

“I have learnt that strong communication within the family is vital. Communication in the home environment, particularly the

intimate emotional relationships between parents and children, where everyone is free and open to discuss important life aspects like HIV/AIDS is the most important education influence which can prevent family relations especially children and youths from lapsing into antisocial behavior hence have negative attitude on other people with a different personality. Sharing information, knowledge , experiences, ideas about issues of sex and sexuality, reproductive health and reproductive rights have ultimate goal of directing positive message, attitude, adopt news ideas and achieve desired results. My family relations are free with me and feel happy that it has proven to be a success

Man stops beating wife after attending stepping stone training

CHITIPA DISTRICT

Monica Luweya of Muwanga Support Group in Chitipa district had this to say: “before attending the stepping stones training, my husband used to drink a lot and beat me up every single day.

But since we both attended the stepping stones training two weeks ago, he has not beaten me for a single day and we communicate very well as a couple. He has also stopped abusing alcohol as a result of the training.”

The husband to Monica added that: “I used to beat my wife every day because I only cared about my feelings and we never used to communicate properly as a couple. But now we are able to plan together on family finances as a couple”.

“I used to beat my wife every day because I only cared about my feelings and we never used to communicate properly as a couple. But now we are able to plan together on family finances as a couple”.

Knowledge changes Mchinji community

MCHINJI DISTRICT

Ignorance is not an excuse when a person is found on the wrong side of the law. But people that are well informed are likely to contribute positively in their communities.

Ida Jere is one young woman who was equipped with knowledge to effectively contribute in her community despite being HIV positive.

Jere is one of the members of Imvani Support Group in Mchinji district, a beneficiary of stepping stones training.

Despite being in her early twenties, Jere has taken a step further by teaching women sexual reproductive health issues. She targets women that come for antenatal services at Mikundi Health Center (the health facility of her area).

"We meet every Thursday to share knowledge and experiences that helps to improve welfare of our homes," says Jere.

The response from the women has been overwhelming because in the event that she does not turn up, she gets many calls asking for an explanation on her absence.

Gender based violence has decreased in many families because information shared during the meetings is taken to spouses in homes.

Jere is a torch bearer in reporting cases of violence against women to the police and other relevant authorities for action.

She recalls a case in which a man who wanted to mutilate the genitals of his wife was reported to police and successfully persecuted.

Knowledge is power, as Jere continues to take messages of change across her community many lives are protected there by meeting the expectations of stepping stones.

COWLHA started implementing the stepping stones in January 2010 with funding from UNDP and tech-



Jere: We meet every Thursday to share knowledge and experiences

nical support from UNAIDS and UNFPA. The project is being implemented in eight districts of Malawi,

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Gender based violence has decreased in many families because information shared during the meetings is taken to spouses in homes.

The XVIII International AIDS Conference was held at Reed Messe Wien: Messeplatz 1, Vienna, Austria Now, July 18 - 23, 2010 under the theme: Rights Here, Right Now

The International AIDS Conference is the premier gathering for those working in the field of HIV, as well as policy makers, persons living with HIV and other individuals committed to ending the pandemic. It is a chance to assess where we are, evaluate recent scientific developments and lessons learnt, and collectively chart a course forward.

Given the 2010 deadline for Universal Access (UA) set by world leaders, AIDS 2010 coincide with a major push for expanded access to HIV prevention, treatment, care and support. The conference was also an opportunity to highlight the critical connection between human rights and HIV; which dialogue begun in earnest in Mexico City in 2008.

The AIDS 2010 programme presented new scientific knowledge and offer many opportunities for structured dialogue on the major issues facing the global response to HIV. A variety of session types - from abstract-driven presentations to symposia, bridging sessions and plenaries - met the needs of various participants.

Other related activities, including the Global Village, satellite meetings, exhibitions and affiliated events, contributed to an exceptional opportunity for professional development and networking.

Key objectives for the Conference were to; increase the capacity of delegates to introduce, implement, and advocate for effective, evidence-based HIV/AIDS interventions in their communities, countries and regions, to influence leaders, including key policy makers and donors, to increase their commitment to gender sensitive, evidence- and human-rights based HIV/AIDS interventions, including harm reduction strategies for people who inject drugs, to serve as an accountability and feedback mechanism for those engaged at various levels of the

COWLHA at the 2010 XVIII International AIDS Conference



Ulanda presenting to the audience on the success of the UA now project in Malawi and how it has help to transform the community.

response to HIV/AIDS, including policy makers and other leaders, to increase public awareness of the continued impact of HIV/AIDS and the need for responses to the epidemic through the media and other means, to increase understanding of the connection between human rights and an effective response to HIV/AIDS, to increase understanding of the synergistic relationship between the scale up of the HIV/AIDS response and other global health, human rights and development priorities among key stakeholders involved in these distinct fields and to provide opportunities for multi-stakeholder dialogue to develop creative solutions to unresolved challenges in research and implementation of HIV policies and programmes.

"I was honored to have the opportunity to share COWLHA experience of the Universal Access now project at the UNDP Dialogue

space, where I participated as a panelist and share our experiences in promoting HIV positive women's rights," said COWLHA Board Chairperson Ulanda Mtamba.

"I was also one of the panelists to the UNIFEM Satellite Session on "Positive Powerful Voice: HIV-Positive's Women's Leadership and Participation" she said.

The session highlighted some of UNIFEM and partner experiences, programmatic learning and evidence-based strategies and policy interventions to advance the leadership and participation of women and girls, particularly those most affected and impacted, in national and international HIV and AIDS responses. The session helped in influencing advocacy and accelerates programming in promoting women's rights in the context of HIV/AIDS. Below are some of the highlights of the session

At the end of the conference, stakeholders made several recommendations among other they agreed on the need to pay more attention to working across movements - acknowledging the challenges of prejudice - especially against sex workers and other particularly marginalized groups. Also engage HIV positive women in broader movements - don't have to be pigeon-holed into HIV only. Working across movements will be strengthened by intersectional approaches that look at multiple forms of discrimination.

Participants also agreed to put much focus on building leadership capacity in the reality of women's contexts and with sufficient resources. This means paying attention to Language, Political, Economic context, acknowledge the ways in which women are already leading even when this isn't publicly acknowledged and Ensure girls get educated

The universal access pledge to provide HIV prevention, treatment, care and support to all those in need by 2010 was a key focus of the XVIII International AIDS Conference. There was wide scale agreement that although the commitment will not be achieved this year, the struggle to achieve universal access needs to continue. The conference provided the opportunity to take stock of the universal access pledge and devise strategies for taking the pledge forwards beyond 2010. As Dr. Michel Sidibe, Executive Director of UNAIDS points out, "it is not a time to scale down, but to scale up."

In the exhibition hall, UNDP had a poster for all its implementers of the UA now project, Susan, Ulanda and Priya stood at the poster to take questions from various delegates of the conference. It was great and we had various interview from different media who were interested to know on how our UA project had been, so Malawi and India experiences were being share.

The key debates on reaching universal access by 2015 appear to centre around two core issues: raising the overall resource demand from international donors as well as national governments and making more effective and efficient use of the resources available now.

The Deputy President of South Af-



Susan at the UNDP poster taking some of the question from one of the journalist

rica Kgalema Motlanthe stated that "It is our duty and responsibility to use the platforms of the G8 and the G20 to advocate for more resources and that even as the world experiences an economic downturn, investments in HIV must not be the soft target for global strictness measures."

Participants and delegates throughout the week we emphasized that the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria will be instrumental in helping to achieve universal access. A global financial commitment to replenishing the Global Fund with US\$20 billion over the next three years will allow the Global Fund to scale up programming and bring us closer to the universal access goals. Global Fund Executive Director Michel Kazatchkine also emphasized the need to increase donor support in line with the growing demand for healthcare to sustain the "considerable progress" in global health made over the last decade.

UNFPA and their partners had also a make a condom badge campaign, each delegate was suppose to make their own badge and be wearing during the conference

The conference also provided a critical platform to assess progress in

relation to achieving universal access. The importance of achieving universal access and bringing it in line with the other health MDGs was emphasized.

The conference demonstrated clearly that we know how to respond to this epidemic, we have the evidence and the strategies that need to be implemented. What is needed to make universal access a reality is the political will.



Way forward for COWLHA AU NOW project

Most important step is to upscale the outputs of the current Universal Access (UA) project to other districts in Malawi. This step requires continued financial and technical support from the current partners (UNAIDS, UNDP, UNFPA) and enhanced working relationship with the Ministry of Gender and National AIDS Commission. COWLHA has the grassroots structures and the Ministry of Gender has the technical people at grassroots level. The only obstacle to up scaling the project to other parts of the country apart from those that are already being targeted is lack of financial resources.

Another desirable step would be to turn the current project into a programme. This is in view of the fact that consistent results can only come from consistent commitment to the cause through a longer term commitment to addressing challenges that contribute to women's vulnerability to HIV and limit their access to treatment, care and support services. Thus, a programme on the same would comprehensively address gender issues vis-à-vis HIV and AIDS.

Ministry of Gender is currently establishing community victim support units with support from UNICEF. This programme has been rolled out in a few districts and there is need not only to upscale the programme of creating community victim support units but also linking vulnerable groups of women to such structures to ensure that they are sustained.

Obstacles and Constraints to the Achievement of Universal Access to Prevention, Treatment, Care and support for Women and Girls in Malawi

Some cultural practices are deep rooted in the value systems of some groups e.g. polygamy for the Ngoni tribe and women not having rights to own customary land in Mzimba district. This obstacle has not been overcome. There is need for more dialogue to influence behavior change.

Low awareness on rights of women by women themselves, hampers their ability to stand up for their rights. This is further compounded by low literacy levels among most rural women. Therefore, there is need for continued human rights education vis-à-vis women's vulnerability to HIV and AIDS.

Economic dependence of women on men continues to breed room for abuse. A lot of women see marriage as the only means to economic survival because they are not able to stand on their own, even if it means living with a husband who puts them at risk to contracting HIV. It is therefore necessary to find ways of making women economically independent to counter the effects of economic dependence on men.

Notions of masculinity of male chauvinism in a patriarchal society of Malawi make it difficult for some women to dialogue with men and traditional leaders. Such notions also lead to the disempowerment of women in marital relationships especially on issues of sex and sexuality like negotiating power for condom use.

Discussing sex and sexuality is a taboo in Malawi yet issues of HIV have a lot to do with sex and sexuality.

Long distances to ART clinics remain a barrier for some women to access treatment and relevant services.