

Empowering Adolescent Girls

Since CARE Malawi started its operations in 1998 it has strived to deepen the quality and impact of programs. This is guided by a strong understanding of peoples' livelihoods and a thorough analysis of structural and systemic causes of poverty and marginalization. Based on this analysis CARE Malawi has chosen to focus on three specific marginalized groups whom we can achieve deep and lasting impact. One of these is rural adolescent girls of primary and post-primary age, approximately 10-18 years¹.

Teleza Bezai belongs to this group. She is an 18 year old girl from a rural village in central Malawi. Like many of the girls in this group Teleza comes from a family with low income and she is economically reliant on others. She is discriminated against by the community based on her gender and because she is young. For example, girls are usually excluded from decision making processes, even where it affects their life or their own body. Although there are good policy and legal frameworks in Malawi which support the rights of girls, rarely are they empowered to claim these rights or have families which support them to.



Teleza with her daughter Melisha

Adolescent girls from rural areas often don't have access to quality and youth-friendly SRH services. As a result, they are vulnerable to pregnancy at a young age, and are often pressured by their families and community to get married and drop out of school. With all these challenges it is no wonder that rural adolescent girls have high absenteeism and drop out rates at school, do not transition to secondary school as often as boys and have low literacy. This cycle of disempowerment is often fuelled by low self esteem and a lack of assertiveness.



Teleza with her daughter & parents

Teleza Bezai is an example of how rural adolescent girls can be pulled out of the cycle with a little support. In 2006, when she was 14 years old Teleza became pregnant and was forced to drop out of school to deliver and nurse her baby. Although there is a Government policy in Malawi to readmit teen mothers often it is not implemented. However FAWEMA, a CARE Malawi partner organization, had been operating in her village to promote the re-enrolment of teen mothers amongst parents and schools. In 2008 Teleza's parents supported her request to return to school, and even care for her daughter Melisha whilst she studies. Likewise, Teleza's school and teachers have supported her re-enrolment and assisted her to catch up. Teleza is now in Grade 8 and performing well. She hopes she can continue on to secondary school and would like to become a doctor and contribute to the health of people in her community.

Many girls like Teleza are not given the opportunity to re-enrol, ending up with low literacy and more vulnerable to other risks, such as HIV. According to the Head Teacher of her school, Teleza was the only teen mother in her school to re-enrol.

Through its program focused on rural adolescent girls, CARE Malawi aims to empower young women like Teleza so they can claim their rights and participate equitably in economic, social and political opportunities and have influence in decision making at all levels. In turn, this will provide greater hope for future generations of women, like Melisha, to be an equal member of their communities.

¹ The other two programs focus on *Women in vulnerable, chronically food insecure, rural smallholder households* and *Women from very poor, chronically food insecure, highly labor constrained female headed households*.