

CHERISH COURSE UPDATE JULY 2021

Starfish introduced the Cherish Course into the Gateway Programme in 2017, with the aim of giving girls and young women a safe environment where they can talk openly about the issues that affect them concerning relationships and sexuality, and inspiring them to choose to live a life of sexual abstinence and find their identity in God according to the Christian Bible teachings. They are encouraged to live with integrity and to care for those around them.

At the moment there are 10 Cherish groups: each group has 15 girls and 2 course trainers. The course runs for 6 months.

Progress Update

In 2020 some groups were meeting every fortnight, but now they have gone back to meeting every week since February 2021 when COVID restrictions relaxed. Each group is reaching out to 15 girls and in total 150 girls are being taught.

In the year 2021, the Cherish Project is planning to identify, train and open 5 more groups in very remote areas of Salima, where there are high rates of gender-based violence, domestic violence, harmful cultural practices and beliefs that put young girls at risk of early pregnancies, sexual transmitted diseases, early marriages and school dropouts.

In 2020, Cherish managed to reach out to 158 girls through its 10 groups. 2020 has been a tough year for the Cherish project due to COVID-19. When schools were closed, Cherish lessons were also stopped as a way of following COVID-19 prevention measures fixed by the government.

When schools reopened in October 2020, all the 10 groups of Cherish reopened. However, in most groups, parents were reluctant to send their girls to Cherish lessons due to fear of infection. So instead of meeting once every week some groups meet once every fortnight.

Stories

Khadja Hassan is a Muslim young girl who has attended the Cherish course at the Rashid Cherish Centre since January 2021. She explained that at first her parents didn't allow her to attend the lessons because they thought she was going to be converted to Christianity. She convinced them that she was only going for lessons.



She added, “Cherish has taught me to see myself the way God sees me. I have learnt to value myself as a girl and never allow anyone to deceive me, especially a man. Even my behaviour towards other people has changed. Though my parents cannot admit that Cherish is a good thing, I know they are happy with the changes they see in me. Every Sunday afternoon they ask me sarcastically, are you not going to your Christian thing? This shows me they are somehow impressed, but they can’t just admit it!”

Khadja Hassan Cherish learner at Rashid Cherish Centre.

We also spoke with a trainer from Kaputu Cherish Centre who said some girls from her centre had started to lose interest because of the long break of COVID-19 in 2020. However, she worked hard on convincing them to come back to the programme.

Now she is happy to report that all the girls are back and life is slowly returning to normal. She added that all girls that underwent Cherish training at her centre were the best-behaved girls in her school. She promised to try her very best to attract more girls to the course.



Agatha Mponda, Cherish trainer at Kaputu Primary School.

Winners Chapel Cherish Centre continued running even when schools closed. The trainer, who is also a Pastor’s wife, said she has been conducting the lessons at her home. Instead of 15 girls of 14 to 17 years old, she limited the number to only 8 girls in order to adhere to COVID-19 prevention measures. She explained that the girls had interesting questions and she could tell that they needed a safe platform to express themselves.



After every lesson they could look forward to the next one. This encouraged her to work hard on the lessons and do a little research on some crucial topics so that she could deliver the lessons better. This also helped her as trainer to gain more knowledge and experience on how to handle girls in a Christian way.

Moreen Katambika, trainer at Winners Chapel Cherish Center

Total expenditure for the GATEWAY and ChERISH programmes in 2020:

MK 3,501,275.16 (approx £3,765)

Conclusion

Like all other Starfish projects, COVID-19 has negatively affected the Gateway project. We have seen a significant decrease in both production and distribution of sanitary kits. When schools closed (March to October 2020) there were reports of increased sexual and gender-based violence, early pregnancies, unsafe abortions, and child marriages throughout the nation. Many schoolgirls got pregnant and some got married and dropped out of school during this period.

Parents and teachers were worried that if schools remain closed for a very long time, most girls would not return to school. Schools typically provide safe spaces for girls, because when they are in school, they are less likely to be forced into marriage and be abused sexually.

Sadly, during the closure period, schools were not there to protect girls. This indicates how significant the Cherish course is in girls' lives in Malawi.

We look forward to continue engaging with young girls in 2021 and offering them much-needed support.