

Our vision: A just world where every child is educated, healthy and cared for.

Helping Girls stay in Education

In a recent article in the Malawian press, the issues promoting menstrual hygiene in girls were highlighted as a developmental issue in Malawi. It was reported that girls from poor communities face disadvantages because they are failing to access sanitary pads.

The Malawian government have removed VAT on sanitary pads to ensure that they are more available so that no girl should miss school. However, girls are saying that it is still expensive to buy sanitary pads.

Starfish Malawi have been aware of this problem for many years and as a result began their Gateway project, a WAY for Girls to have Access To Education, to address the issue and enable girls to have access to free sanitary kits.

We asked the Starfish team in Malawi for information about the Gateway project and what the impact of it has been in the communities where they work.

1. When and why did Starfish begin the gateway project and what does it do?

When: Gateway project began in 2015.

Why: After conducting research it was discovered that girls stay at home 4-5 days in a week when they are having their menstrual periods, which means a girl would be absent from school 12-15 days in a term. As a result of being absent from school many girls were performing badly in their end of term exams.

It was then when Starfish Malawi decided to create an initiative, Gateway, that would help girls during their menstruation to decrease the number of girls being absent from school. The Gateway project of distributing sanitary kits to young girls across schools in Salima started and 7 years down the line it has proven to be one of the successful projects launched, with over 13,000 kits distributed.



The sanitary kit is composed of 5 liners, 2 knickers and 2 sewn pads.

Starfish aims to empower women and encourage gender equality by enabling girls to complete their education, despite physical and cultural barriers, through the provision of reusable sanitary hygiene kits.

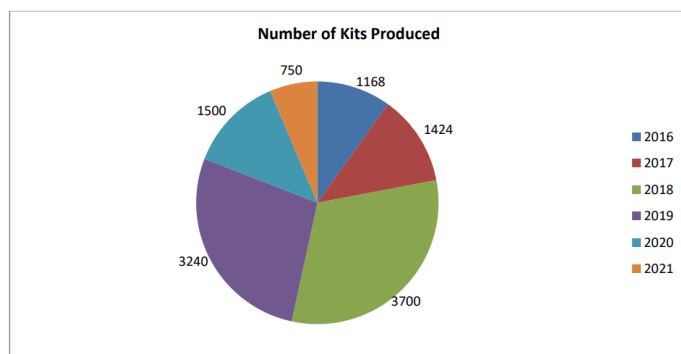
2. What is the impact of its work in the community?

- Many girls are now able to go to school, even during their periods. This is good as many girls are now able to get adequate education throughout the year without any problems. Performance has also improved in many girls' school grades across Salima.



- Women that help in sewing the sanitary kits are now able to be independent women and can afford a couple of essentials, as Starfish buys from the women that help in sewing the kits at MWK200.00 each.

Kits Production Record



Girl's Absence Record for Chigombe L.E.A School

Std	Girls Absent per month (before kits)	Girls Absent per month (after kits April 2021)
3	7	1
4	9	3
5	32	11
6	26	5
7	23	7
Total	97	27

3. Who is involved in making the reusable kits?

- Women in different community groups across Salima help in sewing the kits together, so far Starfish has established 6 sewing groups.



4. Is there enough awareness of the issues of girls not being able to attend school during their period time?

- No, girls don't speak up about their menstruation to anyone. It is still thought to be a taboo for a young girl to talk about their periods, so the problem of one being absent from school is not made aware to anyone. When teachers are asked if they are aware of some of the reasons why young girls are absent from school, teachers responded that many girls prefer not to reveal why they were absent from school, as they are embarrassed to speak up.
- If girls could speak up about the issues being faced during their periods, we believe that this would help in bringing more awareness about issues of Menstruation.

5. What is the response to the project by the local health dept?

- The response is overwhelming and encouraging from the local health department, as they believe it is a great initiative for Salima girls, as many were unable to go to school during their periods but now the number of girls going to school has improved and more girls are achieving better grades which is encouraging.

6. What is the cost of running the project each year?

- The cost for each pack when finished is equivalent to £5. In 2021 Starfish distributed 1,046 sanitary kits which is equivalent to £5,230 cost of production in making the packs.

7. What are the long-term plans for this project?

- Starfish Malawi plans to continue producing sanitary kits for girls across Salima, in the aim of trying to reduce the number of girls that don't attend classes during their menstruation.

Education of young children is a key part of the charity's work and therefore they wish to do all they can to enable girls to stay in school during their periods.

More information about the Gateway project can be found on the Starfish Malawi website at <https://starfishmalawi.com/gateway> or by contacting the charity.

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