

GATEWAY ANNUAL 2021 REPORT

Gateway project is run for young under privileged girls who cannot afford to buy sanitary pads from shops, costing not more than £2 a pack! They, therefore, have to use pieces of cloths while in menstruation and these can leak and cause embarrassment, hence the need to be absent from school during this time.

Upon seeing the great number of girls that used to skip school due to menstrual periods, Starfish Malawi established a programme called Gateway in 2016 and 6 years on it is still plays a significant place in many lives and has produced a total of 11,782 kits.

Currently 3 sewing groups (Chitiwiri School, Napache School and GTOC) are making the Gateway packs which consist of washable pads, pad fasteners and knickers - giving comfort, confidence and dignity.

Distribution

Every week the programme coordinator, Phyllis Banda, visits schools across Salima to distribute the kits in order to ensure education can continue for the girls. During distribution at a school, girls are first told to register their names and class, then a short career guidance talk is given so as to encourage and give the girls a chance to consider goals for their lives. After this activity the distribution begins with instructions of how to use the kits that come in sewn drawstring bags.

In a school where there are more than 30 adolescent girls in a class, we usually divide them into two groups to ensure they are instructed adequately in the session and can give feedback and ask questions. Due to restrictions the girls that attend the meetings have to wear masks, sitting a distance of 2 metres apart. Also, they need to wash their hands as they come in and after receiving the sanitary kit.

Impact of COVID

Production in the sewing groups slowed down overall as the sewing groups were unable to meet due to social distancing rules. Also the distribution of kits came to a halt due to school closures until April 2021. However, things picked up during the second half of the year as the programme resumed with the new leadership of Phyllis Banda and a total of 750 were produced and 1,142 kits were distributed.

We now plan to distribute over 4,000 kits to various schools this coming year, including those we failed to distribute in the year 2020/21 due to closure of schools.

Impact of the Kits

Not only have sanitary kits helped young girls but it has made a significant impact on the women involved in the production of the kits, as follows:

Women have gained skills in making pads and are able to teach other women in their communities on how to make them also.

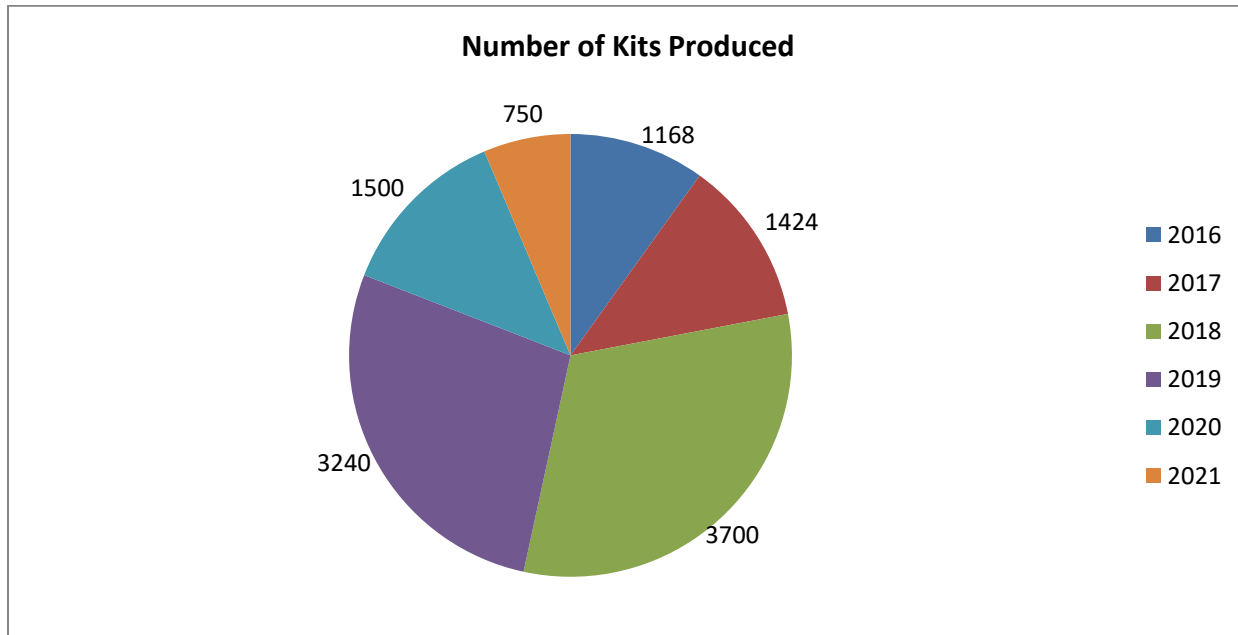
Women are able to be financially independent, as Starfish purchases the kits that they complete. Savings, as parents no longer need to purchase the pads for their own children.



Chisomo Banda, member of the Chitiwiri sewing group shares her experience.

‘My name is Chisomo Banda, a new member at the Chitiwiri sewing group. I only joined the sewing group in July. I found them making sanitary kits and I was also able to learn a few things from the chairlady who also taught me how to make the pad fasteners. I am definitely looking forward to learning more from these ladies in the next production.’

Kits Production Record



From the chart above, we can see that 2021 is showing a lower figure as compared to previous years, this is because the sewing groups were largely closed in April 2020 and only resumed work partially in March 2021.

Face Mask Production

However, in March, 2020, some sewing groups were trained by Starfish to sew face masks and were paid piecework to ensure income could continue and the members enjoyed the social support these groups offered. By May, 2020, 6,800 masks were sewn and distributed freely in churches, markets and villages, across Salima.

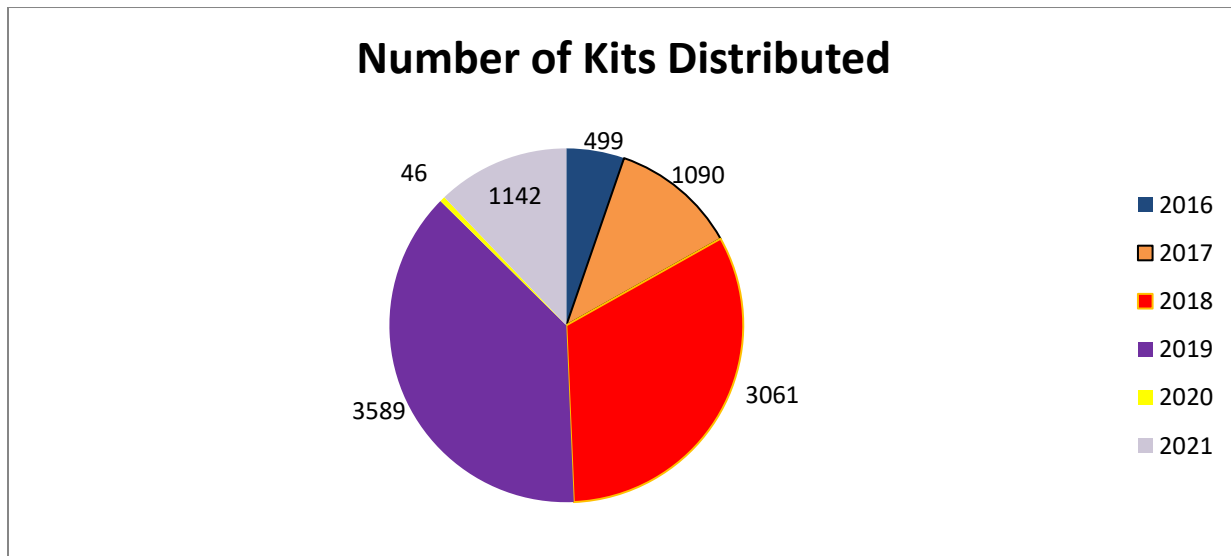
Lenia Joseph, Chairlady at GTOC sewing group, explained that apart from sewing Starfish masks they were also booked by two schools to make masks directly.



They made more than 500 masks and the money was distributed among the group members. She added that they are all grateful to Starfish for the skill and opportunity given. This has brought financial independence among them and limited their dependence on their partners.

However, with time, it was seen that children and more people in the communities started to afford their own masks and tailors started to make masks at a cheap price of K50, resulting in this programme now ending.

Kits Distribution Record



When the programme started in the year 2016, the demand for sanitary kits grew and it was anticipated that the number would continue to increase. However, due to the pandemic the levels fell in 2020 because schools closed in March 2020 and only re-opened in March 2021. Thankfully distribution resumed in July 2021.



Mganga Primary School with girls receiving their kits

Life impacting Stories from Kits Distribution



“My name is **Ivy Chipanda**. I am a standard 8 student at Kaputu Primary School. Ever since I started learning here 2 years ago, this was my first time to receive such an amazing gift - it has honestly changed my life in all aspects. Now I won't be skipping any more days at school because of my periods and I'll be coming to school every day even when I am in my periods since I now have the sanitary kit to protect me from leakages at school. It is important as I am also getting close to writing my Primary School leaving certificate and I'll be able to write them freely without a problem if am to be in my periods. Honestly this has helped me a lot as I used to use small pieces of cloth, which used to leak on my school uniform and I would get embarrassed with people laughing at me and boys would point fingers at me. In the end I would choose to stay home to avoid all this”.

“I am **Mary Chatu** Chairlady for Salima Mothers Group. The programme has really helped a lot of girls in Salima, since more girls are now going to school after being given the sanitary kits. This has brought great change as they are inspired to learn and finish their education. Thank you to Starfish for a wonderful job, they are bringing great change to our girls in Salima.”



Absence Reduction

The attendance of girls at schools where Gateway kits have been distributed has significantly improved and many teachers continue to report the positive impact that they have on the girls' education and exams. The results below show a reduced rate of absence, which indicates that the kits have indeed made a difference.

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

At Chigombe L.E.A Primary School, Gateway kits were distributed in August 2017, when 84 girls received sanitary kits and then again in August 2021 when 141 girls received sanitary kits indicating a rise in demand for sanitary kits in girls in that community.

Girl's Absence Record for Chikombe Primary School

Std	Girls Absent per month (before kits)	Girls Absent/month (after kits April 2021)
4	11	3
5	15	5
6	24	4
7	31	10
8	28	6
Total	109	28

Gateway kits were distributed in August 2019 and in April 2021 absence records were obtained. The figures had dropped with 81 less girls absent days per month after the Gateway distribution, representing 74.3% decrease in absenteeism.



Girl's Absence Record for Mpitilira Primary School.

Std	Girls Absent per month (before kits)	Girls Absent/month (after kits April 2021)
4	7	3
5	14	3
6	22	9
7	19	6
8	26	11
Total	88	32

Gateway kits were distributed in July 2019 and again in April 2021. Absence records were obtained. The figures had dropped with 56 less girls absent days per month after the Gateway distribution, representing 63.6% decrease in absenteeism.

Girl's Absence Record for Kawangwi CDSS School.

Std	Girls Absent per month (before kits)	Girls Absent per month (after kits April 2021)
1	14	4
2	22	10
3	16	6
4	20	9
Total	72	29

At Kawangwi Community Day Secondary School, Gateway kits were distributed in May 2019 and in June 2021 absence records were obtained. The figures had dropped with 43 less girls absent per month after the Gateway distribution, representing a 59.7% decrease in absenteeism.

Girl's Absence Record for Sambafumu Primary School.

Std	Girls Absent per month (before kits)	Girls Absent/month (after kits April 2021)
4	5	1
5	13	4
6	19	5
7	16	6
8	17	9
Total	70	25

Gateway kits were distributed in August 2019 and in April 2021 absence records were obtained. The figures had dropped with 45 less girl's absent days per month after the Gateway distribution, representing 64.3% decrease in absenteeism.

The Cherish Project

In 2018 Starfish introduced Cherish Course into the Gateway Programme as a way of giving girls a safe environment where they can talk about personal issues in groups facilitated by local churches. The areas of discussion focused on their everyday life and relationships, aiming to build confidence to make good life-choices according to Christian Bible teachings. Sadly the groups were not able to meet in 2021 due to COVID restrictions but in 2022 Pastor Bornwell Yona, a member of the Starfish team is planning to re-launch the programme. Also he will be looking to establish groups for young men (Courage) to consider the same issue.

Conclusion

Like all other Starfish projects, COVID-19 had negatively affected the Gateway project. We have seen a significant decrease in both production and distribution of sanitary kits.

When schools closed (March 2020 to October 2021) there were reports of increased sexual and gender-based violence, early pregnancies, unsafe abortions, and child marriages throughout the nation. 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, be abused sexually and become pregnant. Sadly, during the closure period, schools were not there to protect the girls.

Now, with the schools re-opened we look forward to continuing to offer support in 2022.