

CREATING SAFE SPACES FOR ALL MEMBERS OF THE COMMUNITY



It has been a productive year for the Family Planning, Sexual Health and Life Skills team with Rebecca receiving menstrual cup training so she is able to run the pilot project, and Watson being promoted to Education Coordinator.

Since September, Watson has been learning about all of our Education projects and is now managing our Pre-schools, Reading Club, Adult Education, Library, and Life Skills project. During the transition period he continued to support Rebecca with Life Skills lessons at school, and he will do so until we find a suitable replacement for him.

We are delighted to share updates of the various activities that took place before Watson's promotion in September, and since, including meeting with women and men's groups, couples and individuals, and school and youth groups.

Community Groups

As families move around in Malawi in search of jobs, better farmland and a better life, we have met new people at the community meetings such as Under 5s, village banks, etc. Some people have set up their own groups to meet with Rebecca and Watson to learn more about topics such as family planning, sexual health, finance, and Malawi's growing population.

Across these groups we regularly work with 180 women, and one such group is the Chisomo Village Bank, a group of 18 women living in Matete Village but originating from the Southern and Central Districts in Malawi. Speaking about why they moved to the Northern District, they said, "There was regular flooding where we lived so our farmland was affected, and some of us had our land taken for a sugar plantation. We weren't compensated so we had to move in search of new areas to settle and either get piecework or where we can be allocated farmland."



The ladies were really open to learning about family planning options and sharing their experiences, and they hope to be able to support their own daughters to make more informed choices in the future.

Elina, 37, is mother to six children. She said, “I had five children by the time I first heard about family planning methods. My daughters are 21, 19 and 16 and I hope they finish their education.”

Manis is another mother talking to her daughter about these topics but she said that often it is better that they learn it from healthcare professionals so that it is explained correctly.

Fanny, 36, has five children. She said, “We know the struggles, we are unable to clothe and feed our children but like Elina explained, we learned about contraceptives too late.”

The women have all tried various contraceptive methods since learning about them and whilst some had no side effects, others did which made them stop using them and deterred them from trying other methods.

Joyce explained, “The other challenge is that children still signify a sign of wealth. That is why men, even when it is difficult to get money, have more children. It is good that Rebecca and Watson work with men too.”



A discussion with the ladies at Mwaya Women's Group was equally enlightening. With members aged between 23 to 57 years old, everyone is at different stages of their lives.

Grace, 23, said that she only has one child but wishes to have another. She said, "In 2013 I finished school and I was pregnant a year later. I would like to have another child but we are planning for 2028 due to our budget. My husband and I do farming, sell tomatoes, make juice, and do piecework."



During the meetings, Rebecca and Watson asked various questions to learn how much a group knows about a topic, and they discuss local issues arising in the community too. They also encouraged the members to ask questions or share stories as there are lots of myths and false information around the topic of family planning and sexual health. These questions and discussions provide a learning opportunity and help Watson and Rebecca to create future sessions and education plans.

A few examples include:

- Condoms are a major cause of cancer. The oils are harmful.
- Bathing after having sex can protect you from HIV and is a family planning method.
- Some contraceptives are not effective enough. Why do women get pregnant while taking them like DEPO?
- Most babies are born with a disability because their mother used contraceptives.
- Ripple Africa has done a lot in giving us family planning methods, but when it comes to steralisation there are no options.
- At what age do you start thinking to talk to your children about sexual matters or body changes, or would you rather wait until they are pregnant?
- Is it okay for people from different religions to marry?

Rebecca said, "Some of these were asked by our team but the majority are questions or statements that the women have heard or believe. It is important to hear them so that we can understand what the women know and then tailor future sessions on these topics."

Many of the men's groups followed a similar session plan with the group encouraged to ask questions. The other way we attract men to meetings is through *baob*, a local game. After each game there is a family planning and sexual health topic discussed.

Some of the questions asked or topics debated at men's groups included:

- Drunkenness and substance abuse is the downfall of relationships. Men get drunk and forget their responsibilities.
- HIV can be transmitted through kissing with a person who is HIV positive.
- Men are the ones to say when to have sex.
- Is women empowerment best for the community and the whole nation?

Watson said, "We believe life has a lot more to offer when men and women work hand in hand, especially when in a relationship. Listening to your partner on what they want is important and it helps motivate the couple to work hard towards achieving their goals."

This year we carried out random sampling to gain an insight into the lives of our club members. We spoke with 25 members aged between 23 and 57 years old. On average each member has three children and the majority agreed, that given the challenges facing Malawians, having one or two children was better in order to provide for them. One exception was a 47-year-old lady who has 11 children. She believes four children is ideal so they can look after her when she is older.

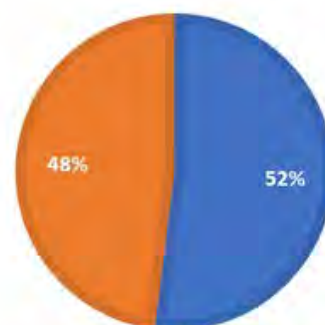
We discussed whether members used contraceptives and for those that said no, the reasons given included fear of becoming infertile, planning for another child, no longer married, or recently had a baby and breastfeeding. Three people said they think contraceptives are bad.

Asked whether they talked with their parents or elders about marriage and sex, 23 said they did, and when asked whether they speak with their partner about sex and family planning, 20 said they do.



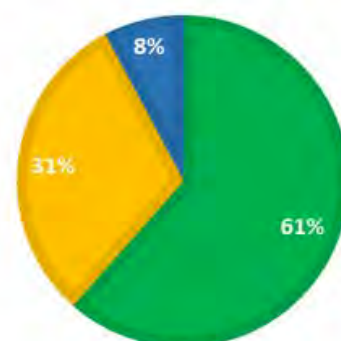
ARE YOU USING CONTRACEPTIVES?

■ Yes ■ No



IF YES, WHAT TYPES OF CONTRACEPTIVES?

■ Condoms ■ Depo-Provera ■ Implant



School Sessions and Youth Groups

Together Watson and Rebecca have visited students from Standard Five to Standard Eight, and secondary school students too. It is evident that most students want to get an education; however, the ever-evolving struggles facing Malawians are affecting this possibility for some.

During a session at Mwaya Primary School, we spoke with the class teacher, Alexander, about the menstrual cup project and one of the reasons behind the introduction of the project. He said, "Unfortunately, girls are not only seeking money to buy sanitary pads but this year we have learned of several female students who are now pregnant because their parents sent them to find food and they engaged in sexual activities to get it. That is why these (Life Skills) lessons are so important. We need to educate our children for the future."



During this class, the students all agreed that everyone wants to have at least one child when they are older. They listed the effects of a growing population, and one student said, "The Chiefs do not have land to share with the community so people have to buy land now. That is one problem we face in Malawi."

With students who are in Standard Five at the start of the 2024/25 academic year, we carried out the usual introductory session which includes learning about Malawi's increase in population, the impact of family size on costs, and general discussions on family size.

At Chiomba Primary School, the class consisted of 47 students, and at Mazembe Primary School the class had 67 students. The youngest was 10 years old in both classes, and the eldest were 16 and 17 years old respectively. In total, 74% of the students across both classes had four or more siblings, and when asked before the population and finance sections of the lesson were presented how many children they themselves would like to have in future, 69% said they would like four or more children. However, after understanding more about family finances, land issues, and other challenges faced by large families, 53% said they think two children is now the ideal family size.

It was interesting to see the differences in opinions and views on other questions including:

- Do you have discussions (about these topics) with your parents/elders?
- Do you think it is okay to have two wives?
- Do you know anyone who has ever had sex for phone credit, food, money?

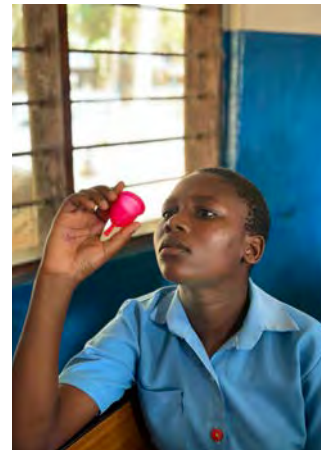
At Chiomba Primary School, all of the students said they speak with their elders about such topics but at Mazembe Primary School, only 41% do. The majority of both classes agreed it was not okay to have two wives, and on the sensitive topic of sex in exchange for food, money, etc., it was alarming that 30% of students knew someone who has exchanged sex for phone credit, food or money. We continue to learn from the data and as we devise the next set of lessons, we tailor certain topics in the areas where these issues appear more problematic. Whilst this latter figure drops to 10% across all of the schools and year groups we work with, it is still very concerning.



One project that we have piloted to try to overcome the issue of girls engaging in sexual activities to earn money to buy sanitary pads is the introduction of menstrual cups.

One student, Nyless, who had been open about why she was in a relationship to get money, said, "I dumped my boyfriend after using the menstrual cup for the first time. I told him I did not need the money for pads. He reacted well and said maybe we will meet in future."

The full Menstrual Cup report is available to download and read [here](#).



Each year we have been pleased to welcome volunteers and this past year was no different. Supporting Rebecca and Watson were nurses Natalie, Crystal, Liz, Carol, and Hannah, plus community and youth group support with Vanessa, Ruby, Talan and Jared.

Natalie and Crystal engaged in conversations to understand the ladies' perspectives on family planning. They then created *Life Game* featuring cutouts representing everyday expenses, such as food, clothing, and children's education materials, alongside cutouts for essential needs like housing, crops, and medical expenses.

The purpose of this game was to illustrate the financial implications of having another child and how it affects the stability of their household resources. Many women in the group expressed a desire not to have another child, and some worried about the potential consequences if it did happen. Through the interactive game and the insights gained from Rebecca's knowledge about family planning options, the women gained a clearer understanding of their situations.

Natalie also supported Rebecca with the youth groups. She met the girls' group which inspired the menstrual cup pilot and hosted a bracelet making workshop. This workshop was not only about making bracelets but provided a relaxed and safe environment to ask questions.

A great and simple demonstration that Liz did to show the effectiveness of condoms was pouring water over an umbrella. The youth group found it very funny but understood the importance of how a condom can prevent pregnancies and stop the spread of HIV and other STIs.

Vanessa worked with Rebecca and the youth groups to discuss self love, challenges in life, and female empowerment. Then through the art of dance, encouraged the girls to express these feelings.



Speaking about the achievements of 2024, Rebecca said, "In life the happiest moments are those when success has been achieved. In 2023 we wanted to continue supporting women to learn skills that could earn them an income. This year we were able to teach four women's groups to bake, and we introduced them to bookkeeping as budgeting is the best tool to help you achieve what you want to."

The team have more aspirations for the future and some of the plans for 2025 include:

- Run more football games to be able to engage with more men in particular
- Establish more men's *bao* groups
- Support and motivate women's group so that the members have more confidence
- Work with and inspire youngsters both at school and through youth groups
- Build relationships with other organisations and stakeholders who can provide family planning to those that want access to it

