



# POWER TO YOU(TH)

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## **YOUNG PEOPLE'S PERSPECTIVES AND DECISION-MAKING REGARDING HARMFUL PRACTICES, SEXUAL AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND UNINTENDED PREGNANCY**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY MALAWI



Ministry of Foreign Affairs



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# PREFACE

KIT Royal Tropical Institute (KIT), in collaboration with in-country research partners, is pleased to present this executive summary of the Power to You(th) baseline study conducted in Malawi<sup>1</sup>. This was one of seven such studies conducted for the Power to You(th) programme in the seven programme implementation countries, namely Ethiopia, Ghana, Indonesia, Kenya, Malawi, Senegal, and Uganda. Power to You(th) is a five-year programme (2021–2025) with a specific focus on harmful practices (such as female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) and child marriage), sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and unintended pregnancy. These are persistent ‘key issues’ on which insufficient progress has been made over the years in the participating countries.

The overall strategic programme objective of Power to You(th) in Malawi is to contribute to more adolescent girls and young women from underserved communities being meaningfully included in all decision-making regarding harmful practices, SGBV and unintended pregnancy. The vision of the Power to You(th) consortium is that adolescent girls and young women from underserved communities make informed choices, enjoy their sexuality and are free from harmful practices in a gender-equitable and violence-free society. This requires innovative intervention strategies which address unintended pregnancy, harmful practices and SGBV in a combined and holistic manner.

Power to You(th) is funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and globally the programme is coordinated by three partners: Amref Flying Doctors, Rutgers and Gender Justice (Sonke). The Malawi in-country Power to You(th) alliance is led by the Centre for Human Rights and Rehabilitation (CHRR), the Centre for Youth Empowerment and Civic Education (CYECE) and Youth Wave. The programme will be implemented in two districts of Dedza and Machinga.

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<sup>1</sup> The full baseline study report is available here: <https://www.kit.nl/publication/power-to-youth-baseline-report-malawi/>.

## BASELINE FINDINGS: YOUNG PEOPLE'S PERSPECTIVES AND DECISION-MAKING REGARDING HARMFUL PRACTICES, SEXUAL AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE (SGBV) AND UNINTENDED PREGNANCY

A desk review and mixed methods baseline study were conducted to inform the Power to You(th) programme implementation in Malawi. The baseline study analysed the perspectives of young people (15-24 years old) and explored their role in decision-making processes related to SGBV, harmful practices and unintended pregnancy.

The study was conducted by a research team from the Centre for Social Research in Malawi, and KIT Royal Tropical Institute in two Traditional Authorities (TA) of the implementation districts of the Power to You(th) programme, namely TA Kapoloma in **Machinga**, and TA Tambala in **Dedza**.

The study design included a literature review, a quantitative survey carried out with adolescents and youth, and an online survey distributed to civil society organisation (CSO) and youth advocates. The qualitative component added focus group discussions with adolescents and youth; semi-structured and key informant interviews with social and state actors; and in-depth interviews with young people. Additionally, young people participated in photovoice research after being equipped with cameras and participating in group discussions based on photographs taken by them in their communities.

This study included 135 qualitative interviews/ FGDs and three photovoice activities, while 849 adolescents and young people participated in the survey, and 43 respondents completed the civic space survey.

# KEY BASELINE RESULTS FOR THE POWER TO YOU(TH) PROGRAMME IN ETHIOPIA

The baseline study suggests a mixed picture of youth knowledge, agency, and attitudes towards harmful practices, SGBV and unintended pregnancy. It also shows large reserves of untapped potential among young people ready to act on these issues, and some positive shifts in public attitudes. On the one hand, young people felt subjectively well-informed about many topics, and were comfortable expressing themselves. On the other, their knowledge was not always comprehensive, they often felt excluded from decision-making processes, and in practice most do not participate in community activities. Repressive gender norms still restrict the rights of all young people, particularly those with multiple vulnerabilities. Conversations about rights are often viewed with suspicion by communities, and young people who speak up can be seen as disrespectful.

Most young people expressed positive views about topics such as SGBV and demonstrated a base level of knowledge on key issues such as child marriage. They felt informed about initiation rites, puberty and prevention of STIs. This was not always connected to actual knowledge as misconceptions about contraception were very widespread (often linked to concerns about morality), as was the view that girls could marry when they started menstruation. Harmful aspects of initiation rites were also still apparent (though often shrouded in secrecy), and unintended pregnancy and SGBV victim-blaming were common. Young people's understanding and confidence were positively nurtured through youth platforms; where these platforms functioned well, they felt empowered by them, but generally youth were not meaningfully engaged by CSOs, and many youth clubs were found to be inactive. Despite their positive impact, most young people were not encouraged to participate in such organisations, and few had been involved in activities directly addressing child marriage, harmful aspects of rites, or SGBV.

Women and girls were particularly excluded from action and decision spaces; the view that young people, particularly girls and young women, should defer to elders was widespread, and the most meaningful engagement in youth activities was too often limited to educated men. These views had demonstrable knock-on effects on rights, restricting agency in decisions about whether and when to marry and have children – partly due to stigmas around pregnancies occurring outside of marriage and (reporting of) SGBV, and the deep-rooted nature of the harmful aspects of some initiation rites. Despite this, some norms are positively shifting and we see the increased use of by-laws leading to the punishment and prevention of harmful practices. Communities require more support in this from authorities such as the police and local leaders. Informal community-based mechanisms do not always deliver justice for young people, while police often fail to follow up on cases – particularly those involving high-status perpetrators.

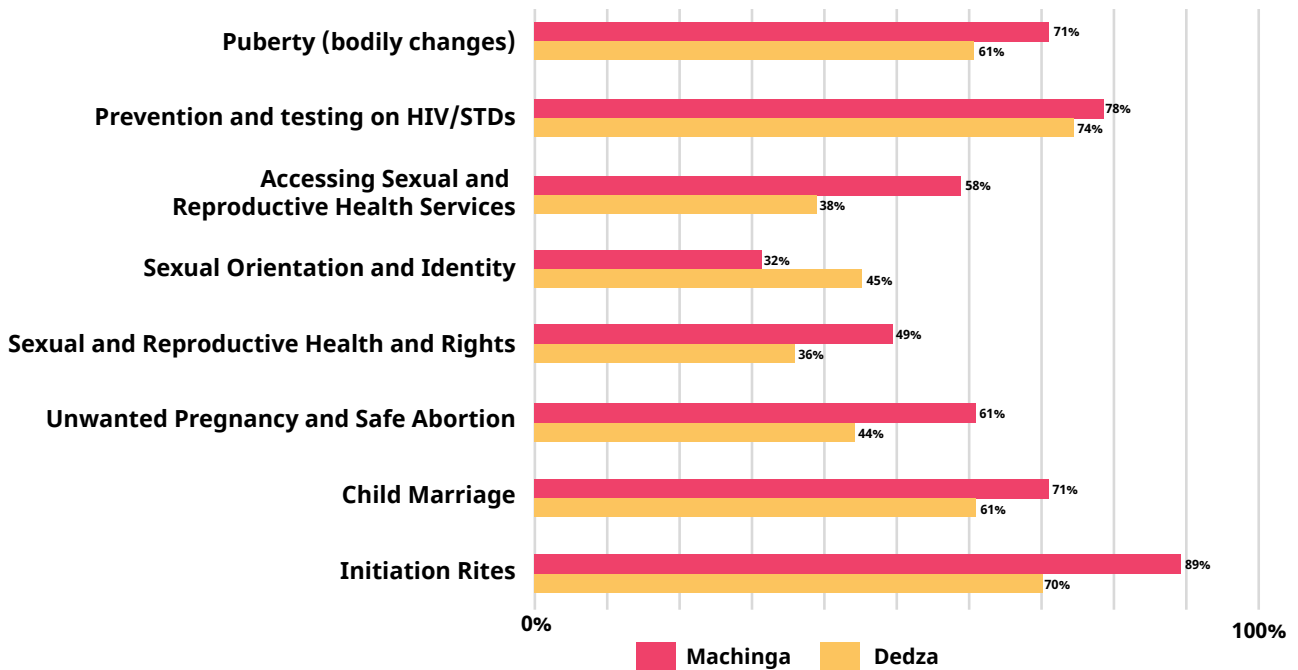
A healthy civic space and media environment is necessary for constructive public conversations which hold duty-bearers accountable on these issues. A mixed picture emerged on the freedom and protection of civic space in Malawi, with many CSOs feeling it to be quite open but others far less so. Media platforms like radio, television

and newspapers are important for lobbying and advocacy, with social media and the rise of feminist movements viewed as opportunities to be explored. CSOs face many challenges around finances, and political and social resistance, but they continue to find ways to build dialogues and defend the rights of young people, while respecting the culture and values of communities with which they work.

# YOUNG PEOPLE’S KNOWLEDGE AND ACTIONS RELATED TO HARMFUL PRACTICES, SGBV AND UNINTENDED PREGNANCY

*Most respondents from Machinga felt informed about different SRHR topics, while less did in Dedza*

Young people felt most informed about initiation rites, prevention and testing of STIs, puberty, and child marriages.



In **Machinga**, respondents felt least informed about sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), and sexual orientation & identity. In **Dedza**, respondents felt least informed about SRHR and accessing sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services. Notably, female respondents in Machinga felt more knowledgeable than males about all topics, except initiation rites. In Dedza males felt more knowledgeable about child marriage, STIs/HIV, accessing SRH services or initiation rites.

*Friends and nurses/healthcare workers were the most important sources of SRHR information*

Friends and nurses/health care workers were most named as young people’s actual and preferred information sources. For current sources, **friends** were particularly common in Machinga. **Nurses/healthcare workers** were named more in Dedza. The largest gap between actual and preferred sources of information was seen for **youth clubs**; the proportion of young people who would prefer to get their SRHR information from this source was higher than that which actually did (36% actual vs. 49% preferred for Machinga, and 29% actual vs. 41% preferred for Dedza).

## *Most young people knew the legal minimum age of marriage for girls, but many indicated that culturally girls could get married when they reached puberty*

While **three quarters of young people knew the legal age of marriage for girls** was 18 years, participants said that when girls started menstruation, they were considered old enough for marriage. Most indicated that the **main driver was poverty**. Young girls are often pressured by their parents to marry wealthy men, ensuring financial and material support for the girl's family but leaving them vulnerable to adolescent pregnancy and SGBV. Other causes of child marriage mentioned were **peer pressure** and **sexual 'cleansing'** initiation ceremonies, while marriage was seen by some to protect girls from rape.

## *SGBV is mostly regarded as unacceptable despite being widespread, and victim-blaming and suggestions to deny young people's agency were common*

Forced marriage, rape and defilement were commonly mentioned forms of violence in both districts. Only 6% of young people agreed that any form of violence named in the survey was acceptable, but **fewer disapproved of forced sex within marriage than outside of it**.

Many suggested causes of SGBV, such as girls dressing 'indecently' and travelling alone, indicated **widespread victim-blaming**. A desire to **limit the agency of young people**, particularly girls (for example by suggesting girls dress modestly), **rather than tackle root causes** was also apparent, linked to concerns about moral decay and over-emphasis on children's rights. While girls were acknowledged as the primary victims of SGBV, the **specific stigma that boys face** in reporting these crimes was also discussed.

## *Occurrence of unintended pregnancy is high, and causes are multiple and intertwined*

*"Giving young girls contraceptives would not help to eliminate or reduce occurrences of teenage pregnancies, because this is just the plan of the devil to encourage young people to practise sex." (FGD with parents, Dedza)*

Main causes mentioned included:

- **Poverty:** unprotected transactional sex is a means of obtaining necessities, while others linked sex to boredom and a lack of productive activities available to young people.
- **Peer pressure, and lack of parental guidance:** as with SGBV, pregnancies were linked to a lack of discipline, related to both poor parenting and legal prohibitions on corporal punishment.
- **Rape**
- **Initiation ceremonies:** as part of *Ndakula* and *Jando*<sup>1</sup> initiates experiment with (often unprotected) sex to see if they have understood the teachings.

<sup>2</sup> The Ndakulu ceremony is for girls who have started menstruating. It means 'you are now matured'. Jando is a ceremony involving male circumcision



- **Lack of education** due to school drop-out and non-participation in youth groups, closely related to:
  - **Lack of correct SRH information:** abstinence was seen as the best way to prevent pregnancy among adolescents, though condoms were mentioned as the second best option.
  - **Misconceptions about modern contraceptives:** linked to side-effects such as infertility, and promiscuity. Some religious leaders disapproved for religious reasons.

Some informants claimed that the number of unintended pregnancies was decreasing slightly due to community by-laws and other interventions.

### *Initiation ceremonies are widely attended and regarded as beneficial, and include teachings about sex*

A **majority** (around three quarters, but more males than females) of survey respondents **had undergone initiation ceremonies**, and similar amounts also intended to have their (future) children pass through them. This suggests the **continued cultural and community importance** of these ceremonies. **More respondents in Machinga** had undergone them and wished their children to do so than in Dedza.

*“Sexual cleansing helps to understand if the girl has really grown up and if she could manage to satisfy her husband in bed after getting married.”*

Harmful practices were linked to some ceremonies, including **kusasa fumbi** in which girls are expected to have sex, partly to prove their ability to perform sexually for future spouses. There were **mixed responses** as to whether people thought this was **still happening** but it appears to take place specifically among the **Yao** tribe. The practice was linked to **STIs and unintended pregnancies**.

Desire to attend ceremonies was linked to **avoid social exclusion** (young people apparently mock uninitiated peers) and **punishments** that girls can face for not participating.

**Cleanliness** (related to circumcision) and social acceptance was mentioned most often as a **benefit for boys**. The main benefits emphasized for **girls** were **menstrual hygiene, cleanliness and learning how to please their husband sexually**. Young people also said these ceremonies showed how to **respect elders**.

## YOUNG PEOPLE'S AGENCY AND MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT

*Four out of five young people (79%) felt that they could express their opinions about relationships, love, puberty and pregnancy in their community.*

The most common **reasons** given by young people for not being able to express themselves, were fear of **embarrassment**, fear that community **elders would shut them down** (both more common among females than males), or the belief that they would **not be listened to**. Fear of embarrassment was higher in Machinga (24%) than Dedza (5%). Most (82%) also felt that their parents/guardians asked their opinion on things, and that they could speak up in class or youth group meetings when they had a comment or question (90%). A common theme across study findings was the cultural view that young people who speak up (particularly those advocating for a rights-based approach) are seen as rude or disrespectful, as **young people are expected to defer to their elders**. This social norm was particularly acute for girls.

*"It is a challenge for us to speak to the leaders in the community. They just speak whatever has come to them. They never mind us. So if they ignored me the first time, why should I go a second time?" (Photovoice with young men 20–24 years, Machinga)*

Despite these positive survey results, most young participants reported that they were **rarely given a chance to express their opinions**. On occasions when young people are allowed to speak during meetings, they felt community leaders and older people did not take their opinions seriously. However, despite this discouraging context, **many young people want to take part** in discussions and actions relating to issues which affect them, including Power to You(th) focus issues.

*Gender norms had a negative impact on the confidence of girls & young women*

**Females often declined to take on positions** when they were selected to lead activities in communities, as norms dictate that males lead while females are submissive. Young men in Machinga and Dedza reported being able to make decisions on issues such as when and to whom to get married, use of contraceptives, education, and the type of job they wanted, whereas females reported that most of these issues were decided for them by their parents (mothers), aunts and uncles, and spouse/boyfriend.

*Adolescent and youth participation in community and youth activities*

*"At the youth clubs it is where we have safe spaces where we [youth] can speak out our concerns and take our concerns into consideration or receive appropriate support." (FDG with young women 20–24 years, Dedza)*

Young people felt safer expressing themselves in front of their peers (compared to older people). They reported that their opinions were valued most by their **parents**,

**followed by teachers, friends and siblings**, and not by community leaders or most adults in the community. They were more **comfortable expressing themselves in youth groups** compared to other community spaces.

Most young people **did not report previous participation in activities** to prevent or positively change child marriage, initiation ceremonies, SGBV, or unintended pregnancy (participation reported by 24%, 10%, 23%, and 34%, respectively). Participation in **Machinga was generally higher** than in Dedza.

Youth in **Machinga** also narratively reported playing a **role at community level** – for example, in meetings organised by chiefs, where young people could discuss their needs with the community. Youth clubs in Machinga also conducted dramas to raise awareness about unintended pregnancy.

In **Dedza**, some indicated that it was **very hard to change initiation ceremonies**, as they were deeply culturally rooted. Despite these difficulties, several participants indicated that action was being taken to adjust initiation ceremonies by some stakeholders, including NGOs, some traditional leaders, the government, and some young people. The *kusasa fumbi* practice is a particular point of focus.

Young people were generally positive about activities they have participated in and are **very willing to participate in the future**.

*A state actor reported that youth clubs were most active in areas supported by development partners, and that other youth clubs were inactive*

**A third of youth clubs** listed as active were **found to be inactive** during fieldwork. In **Dedza** those who were engaged with CSOs **seemed more meaningfully and regularly engaged** overall than in Machinga, **despite higher reported participation in Machinga**. Although there are youth and other structures for community engagement in Machinga, not all young people were aware that they could use them and approached chiefs and the Village and Development Committee to discuss SRHR issues. Meaningful participation was also linked to education, with **those lacking formal education often excluded**.

Some in Machinga also complained that young people were **side-lined by adults in activities involving money**, and that older people often took over tasks intended to benefit youth. In addition, young people involved in clubs and awareness-raising activities were **sometimes mocked by others**. Other barriers mentioned were a **lack of resources and low self-esteem** among young people.

**What stood out:** Many study participants referred to a lack of support and visits from CSOs as the reasons for the inactivity. This is particularly true for youth-led organisations, which struggle with the funding, access and capacity-strengthening needed to ensure they remain truly youth-led and effective in achieving their aims.

*Reporting harmful practices can be a challenge for young people, particularly those lacking formal education or reporting on parents*

Young people are particularly **reluctant to report on parents** and guardians who perpetrate SGBV and child marriage. Those who were not engaged by youth groups or in school were often shy, or unaware that what they were experiencing was violence, and did not know where they could report. Despite this, a majority (61%) of survey respondents said that if they witnessed or suspected sexual abuse against someone in their community **they would report it to community leaders**. This answer was given less often by female respondents in Dedza than others. Others said they would talk to an NGO or their parents. **Hardly any respondents said they did not know what to do or where to find help.**

While many participants also said that cases of violence were reported to the police, chiefs, NGOs, and the child protection office, some said that such cases were **just discussed between parents at community level and no legal action** was taken against perpetrators, especially if they were **wealthy**.

## NORMS AND ATTITUDES OF SOCIAL ACTORS IN RELATION TO HARMFUL PRACTICES, SGBV AND UNINTENDED PREGNANCY

An **implicitly anti-rights rhetoric** was often employed by study participants, with many proposing solutions focused on **curtailing the freedoms of young people (particularly girls)** - for example dressing conservatively, obeying parents, reintroduction of physical punishment, and avoiding leaving the house alone at night. This also manifested in **victim-blaming** of SGBV survivors by many different social actors (including young women), and **conservative norms** that discourage healthy sexual activity among young people, but mainly **promoting abstinence**.

However, many referred to **positive changes** occurring in communities – for example, **in Dedza, increased awareness** of the harms of child marriage, early pregnancy and sexual abuse (especially **the medical consequences**). Increased **knowledge of how to report sexual assault or child marriages** was discussed, as was the improved ability of girls who are pregnant to **return to school** instead of getting married. Barriers to social change included **low education levels, traditional gender norms and lack of parental engagement**.

### *Many active stakeholders to address the main PTY issues*

There are many stakeholders engaged in supporting a more enabling environment to address harmful practices, SGBV and unintended pregnancy. Most of these stakeholders contribute to awareness-raising on the main Power to You(th) issues. However, their level of engagement can differ widely. Especially when it comes to enforcing laws and by-laws, law enforcement officers can easily be bribed. Therefore, perpetrators are rarely prosecuted.

According to participants, NGOs and CBOs are the most active parties that positively contribute to change, as many stakeholders are active in both Traditional Authorities. Therefore, a lot more could be done to collaborate and build on existing or ending projects to sustain efforts with the communities.

A few informants in this study reported that **mothers' groups** taught community members, including parents and young people, about the impacts of child marriage and unintended pregnancy, and they also advised community members not to force girls to get married at a young age. They further advised the girls on using contraceptives, to avoid dropping out of school.

### *Community and religious leaders play a vital role, particularly through creation and enforcement of by-laws prohibiting child marriage*

Leaders playing a vital role include group village headmen, village headmen, and religious leaders. A religious leader in Dedza reported that **by-laws led to the arrest of pastors** who were found officiating child weddings. Leaders also organised **community meetings to publicise** these changes and **promote positive messages**

such as telling parents that even if their daughters get pregnant under the age of 18, they should not get married. Parents reported that cases of violence, including child marriages and SGBV, are **reported to the TAs or lower-level chiefs before being reported to the police.**

## CIVIC SPACE AND ROLE OF MEDIA

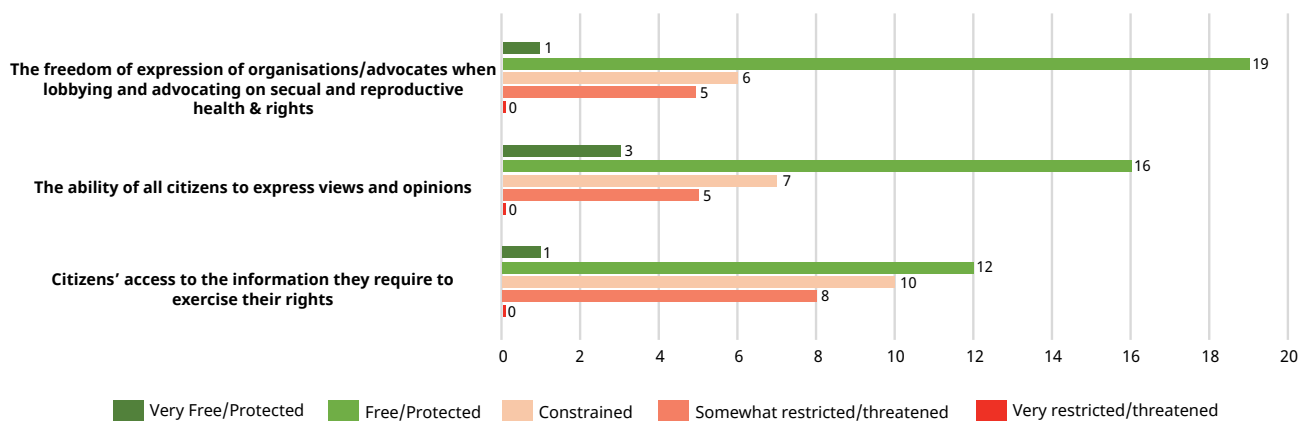
### *A mixed picture of the civic space available in Malawi*

Youth and CSO advocates who responded to the civic space survey (n=31) suggested a mixed picture. Just over **half** (17) of the respondents rated *'the state's respect of human rights and fundamental freedoms'* as (very) free/protected, while the **other half** (14) rated it as (somewhat) restricted/constrained. Additionally, **just half felt there was enough evidence to assist lobbying and advocacy efforts**, citing the need for more evidence on many topics, including the effects of **COVID-19** on civic space, **improving collaboration among CSOs, LGBTQI+ rights and demographic statistics, SGBV, child marriage, abortion, fertility rates and cultural practices.**

### *Freedom of information and expression*

This ambivalence was also seen in relation to freedom of information and expression. For **each of the three aspects examined, at least a third rated it as constrained/threatened to some extent.** *'Citizens' access to the information required to exercise their rights'* was rated lowest of these (rated constrained/threatened by 18 of 31 respondents), while the *'freedom of expression of those lobbying and advocating on SRHR'* was rated most positively (20 of 31 rated it free/protected).

Young and CSO advocates' assessment of various aspects of information and expression



### *Freedom of assembly and association rated more positively, but LGBTQI+ and minority groups have most difficulty gathering and organising, and use of violence, repression and policing noted*

None of the civic space survey respondents rated their *'ability to organise in groups that protest against human rights violations related to Power to You(th) issues'* as restricted/threatened. **This is a positive finding**, but it should also be noted that separately **only five of 31 respondents said there were no restrictions** limiting the freedom of assembly and legitimate protest – while 14 indicated that the **cost and requirements for authorisation was a barrier**, 11 indicated **criminalisation and punishment** of certain activities, and 11 also indicated the use of **violence**,

**repression and policing.** Some (less than a third) rated both *'the state's respect for citizens' rights to associate and assemble peacefully'*, and *'the ability of citizens and/or organisations to organise, participate and communicate'* as restricted.

### ***Most rated the level of safety of civil society actors as good, though activists were rated least safe***

Of those who responded to the survey, **most CSO advocates feel that the safety of civil society actors is generally protected.** Only seven respondents thought activists were not very safe, while four thought this was the case for journalists and CSOs.

### ***Radio regarded as most important form of media in shaping public opinion, followed by social media, television and newspapers***

Most civic space survey respondents said **these different forms of media had a positive influence** on the public, except for social media. For rural populations, radio was mentioned as the most important media source, and for urban populations, television and online newspapers. Young people were seen as a target audience of social media, radio and television.

### ***Dialogue and accountability***

**Most** of the youth and CSO advocates thought that civil society/advocates were **involved in decision-making and approached by the government** for meaningful consultation on policies related to Power to You(th) core issues.

The majority of respondents (20 of 31) thought the dialogue between their organisation and government was **constructive** while six considered it lip service/tokenistic, six said it was irregular, five said it was regular, and only two found it hostile.

In Dedza a state actor talked about the lack of CSO transparency, stating that they did not share their budgets which hindered annual planning and accountability. Young people, state actors and CSO representatives talked about Area Development Committees, which had youth representatives, through which community leaders could be held accountable for promises. In Machinga, girls talked about chiefs, policymakers and Yonoco holding the government accountable. Accountability actions at TA level were not discussed in depth.

*"When trying to advocate against unsafe abortion, they consider you a killer." (CSO advocate of civic space survey)*

**Opportunities for CSOs** suggested by survey respondents included **general freedom of expression, few restrictions, and protection of CSOs to defend human rights.** Three respondents considered **the rise of social media** an opportunity for advocacy, while another talked about the **many feminist networks** recently sprouting up. In contrast, other respondents saw few opportunities: they talked about a **lack of political will and support**, a **narrow** civic space and the **government perceiving them as a threat.** Other threats to civil society actors



mentioned included **religious resistance** that influences the government, mainly on topics such as **abortion** and **LGBTQI+ rights**, as well as a **lack of funding** and political will for advocacy efforts.

## RECOMMENDATIONS PER PATHWAY

### *Pathway 1. Young people demand accountability and responsiveness on harmful practices, SGBV and unintended pregnancy*

- Intensify work with a gender-transformative approach to increase female leadership roles at community/CSO and youth club level and address strongly entrenched victim blaming of survivors of SGBV.
- Provide skills training, economic empowerment opportunities and programmatic engagement of young people to sustain efforts and enhance the confidence of young people to overcome the barriers they currently face, especially with young women and girls who lack leadership positions.
- Work on strengthening the empowerment and leadership of young people with disabilities and other marginalised groups that are generally excluded from existing youth structures and support their engagement.

### *Pathway 2: CSOs amplify young people's voices to claim, protect and expand civic space*

- Take part in improving coordination, collaboration and accountability among the wide number of societal actors, NGOs and CBOs, to amplify change with government actors.

### *Pathway 3: Societal actors support and promote youth rights and progressive social norms and attitudes to youth rights.*

- Reinforce a proactive—rather than a reactive—approach to address child marriage, unintended pregnancy and SGBV (e.g. by-laws, including fines, are reactive). There is a lack of preventive action: police, community leaders, parents etc. mostly respond after an act of violence, pregnancy or child marriage. Reactive systems do not address root causes.
- Find creative ways to engage diverse groups of individuals in viewing sexual violence as a community issue that affects everyone, and to spread messages through social media that build on mutually shared values, such as safety and respect, and that challenge current victim blaming.
- Influence the harmful messages used for the initiation ceremonies, and break myths with evidence-informed information around contraceptive use before marriage.

### *Pathway 4. State actors improve policymaking, budgeting and implementation at the local, national, regional and global levels on harmful practices, SGBV and unintended pregnancy*

- Improve coordination of funding streams for SRHR at district level, and accountability to communities

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