

Nkhotakota AIDS Support Organization



Nkhotakota AIDS Support Organization (NASO) was founded in 1992 as a support group for people living with HIV in Nkhotakota. An area surrounded by plantations and fishing communities, Nkhotakota District draws migrant laborers creating a thriving sex work industry, which has fueled the spread of HIV. NASO continues to respond to the impact of HIV by providing HIV-related services, focusing on the thematic areas of prevention, impact mitigation, care and support. Their care program provides holistic support for vulnerable children by addressing access to education, nutrition, health services and psychosocial support.

NASO was funded by the Firelight Foundation as a partner in the Nike Foundation Grassroots Girls Initiative 3.0



“During adolescent girl corner sessions, those girls who experienced problems due to harmful cultural and traditional practices share their life experiences. This motivates others to be assertive enough in making decisions.”

Why Girls?

NASO’s attention to adolescent girls came about as a result of their work around HIV prevention for orphans and vulnerable children. In both cases they

confronted the impact and burden of HIV on the lives of girls. Data from their own baselines as well as from national studies documented the impact of HIV on girls. In Nkhotakota, girls faced multiple challenges which increased their vulnerability,

These factors – poverty, culture, lack of education, lack of information and services, and powerlessness in sexual relationships – combine to make girls vulnerable to early sex, early and unplanned pregnancy, and HIV infection. Together, these factors diminish a girl’s chances in life and can contribute to lifelong poverty.

- Among the Tonga, Chewa, and Muslim groups, girls have lower school enrollment rates and **higher illiteracy rates**
- Sexual intercourse is male dominated. **Girls feel powerless** to refuse to have sex or to negotiate for safer sex.
- Initiation ceremonies facilitate premature sexual relationships. They also encourage **sexual abuse** of girls by older men under the guise of cultural practices.
- Only **15 percent** of girls have access to sexual reproductive health services

In Malawi, 35 percent of girls between 15 and 19 are mothers¹.



NASO and their sub-grantees reach a range of girls, specifically adolescent girls between the ages of 10 and 19 including:

- Girls in **peri-urban and rural communities** who are in **primary and secondary school**. They often target girls who are from **poor and vulnerable families**
- Girls in **rural communities**, most of them are **young mothers** due to early and unplanned pregnancies. Some of the girls are back **in school** while others are **out of school**. Often girls have been thrown out of their nuclear family home due to the pregnancy and are struggling to survive
- Girls who have dropped out of school and are **at risk for early pregnancy or early marriage**.

Which Girls?

NASO funds four small grassroots organizations to work with the particular needs of increasing girls' success in school. The organizations identify girls through community outreach efforts to identify at-risk adolescent girls or young mothers. They also engage mentor teachers in school to identify girls who are at risk of dropping out.

¹ National Statistical Office and ORC Macro, Malawi Demographic and Health Survey 2000, Zomba, Malawi and Calverton, MD, USA: National Statistical Office and ORC Macro, 2001

The Model

NASO and their partner grassroots organizations focused on increasing girl's successful transition to secondary school. They focus on reducing early pregnancy and early marriage through a program of support that builds up:

PERSONAL ASSETS

Girls participate in the Adolescent Girl's Corners **weekly**, and in some corners **twice a week**.

During their gathering the girls benefit from the **support and encouragement** of friends. They gain hope and confidence in their aspiration for completing their education as they try to build a better life.

The girls develop **life skills**, including problem solving, negotiation, and decision-making skills. They also learn about their **rights**, how to protect themselves and where to go if they experience abuse.

The process of dialogue and engagement increases their own **self-worth** and **self-confidence** about what they are capable of achieving. Girls also develop **leadership skills** and training in **advocacy**. They use those skills to **organize joint action** on issues that affect girls.

HUMAN ASSETS

Girls learn about their **bodies**, and about **sexual and reproductive health and rights**.

They are given information on where to access SRH services at the village level.

They also engage in **sports**, which contributes to their physical health, while also building teamwork and leadership.

Girls also benefit from tutoring and mentoring to increase their academic confidence and success. Those who perform well receive recognition and prizes, in the form of school materials.

Recently, the program integrated the arts. In that program they **use song, dance, plays, and dance to explore** communication and self-expression; identity and confidence, as well as analysis and creativity. The program also builds community as it connects girls to their culture in positive ways.

Girl Friendly SRH Services: NASO created a district advocacy group that interacts with the district health management on a regular basis to ensure that when girls go to the clinic for services they find a supportive and girl-friendly environment that is responsive to their needs.

Village Agents: NASO ensures that girls know the local community health workers, or village agents, who can provide contraceptives and condoms to girls. Village agents are connected to the District Health Management services. They help to bring supplies to the community level to increase access, especially for girls.

FINANCIAL ASSETS

In some community corners, girls are starting **small projects** that can help them to generate an income to support their activities. **Girl mentors** were recently trained in a financial literacy curriculum, which will support girls to develop goals and strategies for their savings.

SOCIAL ASSETS

Adolescent Girls Corners: Girls' corners create a platform for girls to share their experiences and exchange ideas about the ways they can address their problems. As they gain a sense of group identity they also gain the confidence to take collective action or join together to respond to the challenges girls face in their community.

Girl Role Models: Each girl's corner is led and facilitated by **two young women** who serve as role models to adolescent girls. Role models undergo training and receive ongoing support



from NASO's project officer. They're recruited from the same communities as the girls they work with. That way, by seeing another girl who grew up in their community and successfully completed her high school education, the girls gain confidence that they can also achieve that goal. The role models facilitate discussions with the guidance of a curriculum. Girls also have open space for discussing problems and challenges that arise at home, at school, or in the wider community. Mentors provide one-on-one mentoring and small group discussions.

Parent Role Models: NASO and their partners also recruit parent role models. They recognize that decisions made by parents open or close opportunities for girls. They identify parents who have invested in their daughter's education and also encouraged their girls to complete their schooling. These families act as positive examples for other families. They also mentor and encourage other parents through home visits as well as community dialogues.



Girls Empowered

THE CHANGE

NASO supported 4,000 adolescent girls over the course of three years. The program has achieved impressive results. Monitoring data and a survey of girls shows that **75% of the girls** have:

- power **within** – girls have a sense of determination to complete school and succeed in school, self-value and clarity that they can choose to wait to have sex, and confidence in voicing their opinion and expressing their needs. They are expressing their sense of self and connecting with their culture through poetry, theater, song and dance.
- power **to negotiate** – for their needs and their rights, with peers, parents, and with teachers at school. With clear goals for what they want to achieve, they are able to engage others to support them. They no longer passively accepting what is decided on their behalf. They are speaking up on their own behalf.
- power **over** – as girls speak up, and parents, community leaders, and teacher listen to them, they have a greater input on shaping the decisions that affect their lives. They are making choices that are about getting more schooling so they can have a better future. They are choosing to not have sex or to use contraception so they can delay childbirth..
- power **to act** – girls are taking action to solve problems. They are rescuing girls from child labor, talking to community leaders and parents to get their peers back in school. They are also starting small projects that can give them an income to purchase school supplies. They are also learning to save for their future needs.
- power **with** – in their safe space the girls learn together and learn from each other. They talk through life choices. They help each other with school work to succeed in school. When another girl's rights are violated, they take action. In one case leading to a tougher sentence for the perpetrator. They are using their collective voice and leadership to affect change.

The systems of support, skills, knowledge, and confidence they have developed will help to sustain and propel their continued momentum.

