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Female Chief in Malawi Annuls more than 1,500 Child Marriage & Sends Young Girls back to School

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Malawi is one of the most concentrated regions for child marriage in the world. Unfortunately, 50 percent of the girls there get married prior to the age of 18th and a quarter of maternal deaths happen in cases of teen pregnancy.

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However, Chief Theresa Kachindamoto is trying to change this. Since she was elected back in 2003, she has annulled more than 1,500 child marriages and has been nicknamed The Terminator.

Who Is Theresa Kachindamoto?

She is the youngest of 12 siblings who worked as a secretary at a college in southern Malawi for 27 years before being elected for their leader, followed by her reputation of being good with people.

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During her 16-year tenure over the Dedza district, she fired a lot of male subchiefs who didn't want to prohibit child marriage and also created a big network of female informers.

They are known as the 'secret mothers' and ensure the chief's rules are obeyed across the 545 villages in the district.

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Even though many of her opponents claim she's defying their culture, in her view, she's redefining it. Sadly, she has received treats from males who told her horrible things like 'You are still quite young. Are you ready to die?'

To such threats, she just replies that they can go ahead and kill her because this is the only way in which they can prevent her from helping young girls and keeping them safe.

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International Recognition

According to Habiba Osman, a program specialist at the UN Women's Malawi office in the capital Lilongwe, the chief has made a great system for management of child marriage and it functions because the entire community participates.

She's also received an award for Leadership in Public Life for her work in 2017 on the International Women's Day at the 16th Annual Vital Voices Global Partnership Award Ceremony.

For chief Kachindamoto, when girls get education, everything is possible.

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How Did She Put an End to Child Marriages?

In 2017, she adopted a constitutional amendment that increased the minimum age for legal marriage from 15 to 18 years, both for girls and boys.

With the law being passed, she's now relying on the Government and stakeholders like UN Women to make sure the law is being implemented.

They're also working on sensitizing the community about the new amendment and to inform girls and boys that marriage before the age of 18 is illegal. However, she's aware that people will need time to adopt this new law and that more work needs to be done.

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She knows that time is needed to change attitudes in male chiefs and parents who benefit from arranged, forced, and child marriages.

Are Traditional Views in the Country Harming Young Girls?

In a lot of areas, people still think a girl is ready for intercourse and babies when she enters puberty.

But, Kachindamoto is firm that these old ways of thinking need to go away once and for all. Back in 2000 when she visited her old district, she found that families were allowing their children, some as young as 12, to get married because of financial reasons.

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They saw the marriage of one and another family as a way to increase the workforce and be able to bring more food to their tables.

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