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By Jennifer Yang, Global Health Reporter

The Star (03.03.2014) - Who is a girl and who is a woman? For visitors to Malawi, the question tends to bubble up, especially when you meet someone like Christina Asima.

Christina is from Chitera, a village in southern Malawi. She has the face of a young girl — above the neck she is all smooth skin and shy eyelashes. But her slight figure belongs to a woman: curves, hips and the soft middle of someone who recently carried a baby.

Is Christina a girl? She is only 15. Is Christina a woman? She has already married — briefly — and is now breastfeeding.

The question looms until a reporter finally asks it: Do you think you're a girl or a woman?

Christina gives her response in Chichewa, Malawi's national tongue. But her *isn't-it-obvious* tone reveals the answer before it is translated.

"I'm a girl," the translator says, as Christina giggles.

Malawi is full of Christina Asimas, girls who have become women before their time.

Life is difficult for most people in Malawi, a sub-Saharan nation of nearly 16 million. More people have HIV than electricity. Half of the population lives below the poverty line, with a quarter earning roughly 15 cents per day. The average Malawian can expect to live only until 53.

But life is especially hard for girls. Just ask Joyce Banda, the country's first female president.

"I don't even know where to start when I begin to talk about the challenges for (Malawian) women," she said wearily in a recent interview with foreign reporters.

But Banda begins by discussing child marriage. In Malawi, children can legally marry at 15 if they have parental consent, but girls are known to marry at even younger ages. On average, one in two girls will be married by their 18th birthday. Only seven other countries — Niger, Chad, Bangladesh, Guinea, Central African Republic, Mali and Mozambique — have higher rates of [child marriage](#), according to the United Nations Population Fund.

Unsurprisingly, many Malawian teenagers are also mothers; 35 per cent of all pregnancies involve teenagers. One in 36 women die from maternal causes in Malawi and a quarter of these deaths are teens.

Because their bodies are immature, Malawi's teen mothers are more prone to developing obstetric fistulas — holes that can leave them permanently incontinent and socially ostracized.

Some Malawian girls are pushed into early pregnancies — and marriages — after participating in a rite of passage called [initiation](#). The age-old practice is meant to teach girls to become women, but in some villages girls are encouraged to have premarital sex to “cleanse” and prepare for their future husbands. In some cases, parents even pay adult men, known as “hyenas,” to have sex with their daughters — who are discouraged from using condoms because of cultural beliefs.

Such practices help explain why girls are more prone to HIV in Malawi, where 10.6 per cent of the population is infected. More women than men are HIV-positive — nearly 13 per cent, versus 8.1 per cent. In the 15-to-24 age group, HIV prevalence is nearly three times higher for girls than boys.

Better education would help. Sixty-six per cent of uneducated women wind up in child marriages, versus 16 per cent of women who have attended secondary school, according to the UNFPA.

But only 7 per cent of girls in Malawi complete secondary school, compared with 15 per cent of boys. Girls face specific barriers to education. For example, many school bathrooms lack privacy or adequate sanitation so girls tend to stay at home when they are menstruating — making them prone to falling behind and dropping out.

In Katuli, a subdistrict in southern Malawi, some students live 16 kilometres from the nearest community secondary school; girls who walk this distance are vulnerable to rape. In an effort to keep the girls enrolled, the headmistress is now letting some of them “board” at the school; 32 girls are sharing one classroom as a bedroom.

The biggest obstacle for all Malawian children is money: secondary school isn't funded. Poorer families prefer to send sons instead of daughters.

“The girls don't go to secondary school,” said Banda. “And when they don't go to secondary school, the community encourages them to get married. And when they get married, they're also the ones that are dying giving birth.”

“They're getting married not out of choice. They are getting married because of the whole question of poverty.”

Christina Asima was driven into an early marriage after her mother and father divorced. Her mother remarried but her new husband issued an ultimatum: move away with me or stay with your children and we separate. She chose her husband.

“Myself being a child, I was forced to start looking after my siblings,” Christina says. “I had to immediately find a relationship; it was a sexual relationship. I started sleeping with this man until when I got pregnant.”

Christina married the father of her child — though “marriage” in Malawi is sometimes loosely defined and can be as simple as a verbal agreement to become man and wife. In any case, Christina broke up with her husband after just one week and she is now raising her child alone.

“I'm happy that I gave birth to a baby boy,” Christina says. “Growing up in the same society, I know boys are more privileged than girls.”

Christina's circumstances haven't caused her to lose all hope, however. Malawian girls like her now have allies.

One is the Girls Empowerment Network, a grassroots organization founded in 2008 that advocates for girls' rights, including the elimination of child marriage and initiation rituals. Christina now belongs to a girls' club created by the network.

"In Malawi, girls are not groomed to become independent citizens . . . instead they are prepared to be a mother, a wife," says spokesperson Joyce Mkandawire. "How we change that is to involve the girls."

But organizations like the Girls Empowerment Network have also recognized the need to involve another group: the village chiefs and traditional authorities.

In Malawi, traditional leaders act as custodians of the local culture; this means they can also change the culture.

In the central district of Ntcheu, one senior chief has initiated a robust maternal health campaign in his area, which covers 211 villages.

Known as Chief Kwataine, the former teacher was haunted by the memory of a friend who died in childbirth. After becoming chief, he banned the traditional practice of giving birth at home to encourage the use of health facilities.

The results have been dramatic: Kwataine claims there have been no maternal deaths in his area for a half-dozen years. (This cannot be verified by the health ministry, which doesn't track statistics at this level. However, a UNICEF spokesperson said Kwataine's district does have one of the lowest maternal mortality rates in the country.)

In 2011, Kwataine also enacted a bylaw prohibiting girls from marrying before 21. Any parent who forces their daughter to marry prematurely must now pay a fine of chickens and goats — a significant price.

Kwataine, a portly man with a mischievous smile, was appointed chairperson of the president's Initiative on Safe Motherhood in 2012 and now travels to other rural districts, hoping to persuade other chiefs to follow his lead.

"I've had several parents knocking on my door and they say, 'Our chief is not presiding over my child's wedding,'" he says, grinning. "And I say, 'beautiful!'"

But chiefs like Kwataine are still the exception. And funding for his outreach work is drying up in the wake of the largest corruption scandal in Malawi's history, which erupted last fall. Dubbed "cashgate," the scandal has led to 70 arrests, temporarily frozen foreign aid and now threatens to unseat Banda in this spring's general election.

Mkandawire, of the Girls Empowerment Network, admits she has been disappointed by the lack of progress since Banda assumed the presidency in 2012, following the death of her predecessor.

"I wouldn't say it's (Banda's) fault but rather the whole system itself," Mkandawire says. "The players, the ministers, they haven't had her directive. It's the machinery."

Even under Banda, the legal definition of "child" remains murky, although Malawi has ratified the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child, which considers anyone under 18 to be a child.

"(What's) really needed right now in Malawi is a harmonization of the definition of the child," says Sarah Hendriks, global gender adviser for Plan International, a children's development organization. "In one law, a child is anyone 16 and younger. In another law, it's 18 and under; in another law, it's 15."

Hendriks said a new omnibus bill is now being proposed in parliament that would cover a range of issues — including raising the legal age of marriage to 18 without any exceptions. The bill has stalled, however, in part because it also takes aim at other divisive issues such as polygamy, a firmly entrenched practice in certain regions of Malawi.

"It's throwing the cultural and social fabric of the country into a bit of mayhem," Hendriks says. "So we may see this legislation stalled for quite a long time."

But Hendriks is optimistic because of a new global partnership, called 18+: Ending Child Marriages in Southern Africa, for which the Canadian government has provided about \$600,000 in funding. And in villages like Chitera, Joyce Mkandawire sees hope in girls like Christina Asima.

Some of the pressure on Christina's young shoulders was recently relieved when her mother returned to the village and resumed caring for her other children. The Girls Empowerment Network had helped Christina approach her village elders, who persuaded her mother to return.

Her girls' club also helped Christina "come into my senses" and she has decided to try and go back to school. However, determination alone may not be enough.

"I'm not in school yet because now I have problems with raising food for my child," she says. "I have no fees to support myself."

Christina still has time to recapture some of her childhood. But for young women like Mary Anderson, it is too late.

Anderson, 20, is raising two daughters, aged 7 and 1, from two marriages that both ended when her husbands abandoned her. On a good day, she earns about a dollar pulling weeds or fetching water for construction workers in her remote village of Mweneya. She dropped out of school in Grade 4.

But the tiny woman with a deeply dimpled smile is optimistic for her daughters — there are signs of change. When her first daughter was born, the nearest health centre was under a mahogany tree; today, trained health workers tend to patients inside a brick structure, albeit one still missing a roof.

There are also new rules in Mweneya. The village headman, Hartwell Musewu, has been in power since 1986 but a few years ago, he started hearing radio programs about the consequences of child marriage. He decided to enact a new law: girls in Mweneya are now forbidden from marrying before 18.

"I do not want my daughters to pass through the channels that I passed through," Anderson said through a translator. "Though I might be facing troubles in sending them to school, I will find ways and means of supporting them."

"It's possible."

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