This graphic novella was made with Khadija Chikoya, now 20-years-old, in June 2013 at her home in Nkhotakota, Malawi. Khadija, a dedicated and talented student, had a bright future to look forward to after winning a scholarship to attend boarding school at 16 years old. But after leaving home for the first time, Khadija found herself ill-equipped to face the many challenges adolescents experience, including navigating her first relationship. An unexpected pregnancy forced Khadija to leave her boarding school and return home to raise her child. When Khadija thought her opportunity to complete school was lost, the grassroots organization Nkhotakota AIDS Support Organization (NASO) entered her life, reassuring her that as a teen mom she can indeed return to school, and they will support her in achieving her potential.

Established in 1992, NASO mobilizes communities, creates awareness and builds communities’ ability and capacity to manage HIV- and pregnancy-related care and social services for vulnerable children. Recognizing that teenage pregnancy rates in sub-Saharan Africa are some of the highest in the world, NASO saw an opportunity to help girls in Malawi who had been forced to drop out of school after becoming pregnant. NASO supports programming for smaller community-based organizations to create Girls’ Comers in schools and community centers to provide safe spaces for adolescent girls, trainings on reproductive and sexual health and vocational skills. A key part of the Girls’ Comer concept is to encourage teen moms to return to school, and to train them as peer mentors.

Khadija’s story is part of the Grassroots Girls Book Club graphic novella series that depict the true stories of six incredible girls. Each girl co-authored her own story and one of six talented emerging female artists illustrated her words. These graphic novellas aim to show that positive change is happening for girls, and to also raise awareness for the many girls who still need urgent support from organizations like NASO. Khadija’s hope is that her story will inspire you to discuss the issues facing girls globally and learn more about the grassroots organizations that are changing girls’ lives for the better. At the end of this graphic novella is a discussion guide to dig deeper into the issues Khadija faced. Explore how you can take action with your friends and classmates online at grassrootsgirls.tumblr.com to help make the world better for girls everywhere.

INTRODUCTION

This graphic novella was made with Khadija Chikoya, now 20-years-old, in June 2013 at her home in Nkhotakota, Malawi. Khadija, a dedicated and talented student, had a bright future to look forward to after winning a scholarship to attend boarding school at 16 years old. But after leaving home for the first time, Khadija found herself ill-equipped to face the many challenges adolescents experience, including navigating her first relationship. An unexpected pregnancy forced Khadija to leave her boarding school and return home to raise her child. When Khadija thought her opportunity to complete school was lost, the grassroots organization Nkhotakota AIDS Support Organization (NASO) entered her life, reassuring her that as a teen mom she can indeed return to school, and they will support her in achieving her potential.

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NASO is supported through the Grassroots Girls Initiative by the Firelight Foundation. Based in Santa Cruz, California, the Firelight Foundation works to identify, fund and strengthen promising community organizations that support the health, resilience and education of children in Africa.

The Grassroots Girls Initiative is a partnership of five funders that believe grassroots organizations are uniquely qualified to create and implement effective, organic solutions for the most underserved girls in the communities where they work. Grassroots Girls Initiative partners are: American Jewish World Service, EMpower—the Emerging Markets Foundation, Firelight Foundation, Mama Cash, The Global Fund for Children and the Global Fund for Women.

Discover other Grassroots Girls Book Club graphic novellas made with girls in Poland, Kenya, the Dominican Republic, Colombia and India at grassrootsgirls.tumblr.com.

AFTER EIGHT MONTHS OF ABDOMINAL PAIN, MY FATHER PASSED AWAY. HE LEFT BEHIND EIGHT CHILDREN AND MY MOTHER. BEFORE HE PASSED WE WERE POOR, STRUGGLING TO SURVIVE ON HIS AMBULANCE DRIVER SALARY. BUT THESE LITTLE CHALLENGES WERE NOTHING COMPARED TO THE VAST EXPANSE OF TROUBLES THAT LAY AHEAD. AFTER MY FATHER DIED, I WORRIED ABOUT OUR Uncertain Futures AND HOW WE WOULD SURVIVE WITHOUT HIM.
Oh children, how will I provide for all of you now? I know you are still grieving, but we must talk to you. Without your husband you have no right to live here. I need this house for my family. You and your children must leave.

I have eight children! Where will I go? How will I care for them without even a roof over our heads? Go back to your family. Ask them to help you. We cannot.

Uncles, I am so ashamed, but I’ve been left stranded with no husband and no house. Is there any land for us to live on?

We were already reeling with the pain of our father’s death. When my father’s family chased us out of the only home we’d ever known, we felt humiliated. As we walked nine miles to Buloumuti, my mother’s village, everything was confusing and uncertain. The only valuables we brought from our old life were three bags of rice. Mother had to be smart with our last possessions. I stayed home from school for a month to help my family make bricks to build a new home.

Finally we traded our last bag of rice with a kind man to build our house. He knew we couldn’t do it alone.

Mother’s relatives are poor subsistence farmers, but they were able to give us a little of their land. They couldn’t help us with building a home though.
Slowly the walls of our house went up and our new life took shape.

Before the sun came up to light our darkness, I would wake, get dressed and clean the house. Then straight to the field to dig up some CASSAVA.

When my father was still with us, we ate three times a day. But in the village we barely had enough for one daily meal. I'd leave school at 5:30 pm, and soon it would get dark. We were too poor to have lanterns. My classmate and I would shake with fear walking through the forest where men sometimes lurked and grabbed girls.

In town my school was close, but in the village I had to walk an hour and a half to school. Every day I arrived at school exhausted. Adjusting to my new life was tiring, and it was hard to concentrate in class.

It's only noon, and I'm so tired! Focus Khadija! With no education you will be a slave to this world, toiling tirelessly like mother.

We helped mother turn the dry dirt plot next to our house into a garden. This land was our only means of survival. We planted cassava, rice and corn. Our plot of land was not so good, and the farming season lasts for only six months, so we couldn't produce enough food. Our focus became day-to-day survival.

Poor Khadija! With no education you will be a slave to this world, toiling tirelessly like mother.

Gloria, did you hear that? Is someone hiding out there?

Oh Khadija, let's hurry! Just keep your eyes open!

I'd leave school at 5:30 pm, and soon it would get dark. We were too poor to have lanterns. My classmate and I would shake with fear walking through the forest where men sometimes lurked and grabbed girls.
Any supper tonight, mother?

Not tonight, my daughter, not tonight.

Always work hard in school Khadija. With an education you can take charge of your own life and also help support your family.

Mother, I passed! I will continue my education, just like father wanted!

Oh Khadija I hoped I wouldn’t have to tell you this, but we don’t have any money to pay the school fees.

I worked harder every day and learned to continue with less sleep.

I studied for the final exams to pass into secondary school.

Every free moment I had between farming and cleaning the house.

In Malawi, primary school is free, but to go to secondary school, families must pay between US$60 and US$300 per child, per year. Even the lowest fee is unattainable for poor subsistence farming families like mine. I wept because this opportunity was passing me by.

I passed! I’m going to secondary school!
Attending secondary school is a luxury few can afford. Poor families aren’t able to send all their children to school, and will often choose to send only their boys, believing they will be better positioned to earn and support the family after finishing school. If children are able to stay in school, facilities are often too inadequate to provide a quality education. Overcrowded classrooms, outdoor lessons interrupted by rain and perennial teacher shortages mean that students often don’t get the attention they need in class, and are not motivated to continue.

For girls, the dropout rate gets even higher with the onset of puberty. Many are forced into early marriage, either by tradition, family financial considerations or early pregnancy. Childbearing among adolescent girls in sub-Saharan Africa remains high. The adolescent fertility rate is 108 births per 1,000 girls aged 15-19 in the region, compared to 73 in South Asia and 72 in Latin America and the Caribbean. (World Bank, 2010)

Correspondingly, contraceptive use among 15-19 year old girls is low. Only 31 percent of married girls who want to avoid pregnancy, and just 14 percent of unmarried sexually active girls who want to avoid pregnancy, are using a modern contraceptive method. (UNFPA, 2010)

Malawi, called the “Warm Heart of Africa” because of how friendly Malawians are, is a populous landlocked country in southern Africa. While picturesque Lake Malawi is stunning, Malawi has a high level of poverty and one of the worst records in the world in the areas of health and education.

Malawi has the fourth lowest GDP per capita in the world. About 84 percent of the population still lives below the income poverty line of US$1.25 a day and 80 percent below the U.S. a day threshold. (Nineteenth Development Program’s Malawi Development Report for 2010)

Of its population of approximately 16 million, more than 80 percent of Malawi’s population is rural, and dependent on agriculture for subsistence. (World Bank, 2010)

Almost 80 percent of poor children do not even start primary school, which is free in Malawi. Access to secondary and higher education is largely confined to non-poor households, mainly due to enrollment fees. Some 82 percent of the population between the ages of 15 and 24 are illiterate. (Rural Poverty Portal, 2010)

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For a year I helped my mother farm. When I got a little time I’d go back to my old school to re-learn the lessons to take the secondary school exam again.

The words of my father pushed me forward, even in the face of defeat. I did better than the first time and earned a scholarship to cover half the school fees.

That was such a happy day! We celebrated, sang and danced. My older siblings gave me some presents. Even though I started secondary school late at 16 years old, everyone was still so proud of me.

Even though I was having a terrific time with my new friends, I kept my promise to my mother and studied hard. My family was depending on me!

Let it rain, let it shine, I will pass these exams!

I passed and I got the scholarship for the girls’ boarding school!

Now that your father's benefits have come in, I can pay the rest of your school fees after the scholarship. You are the pride of our family, Khadija! Today is a wondrous day!

Hi, my name is Khadija.

So what do you like to do here?

Wow, that sounds great! My mom told me I’d learn new things about life. I guess she was right!

Hey Khadija, we’re going to play netball. Come on, we’ll teach you. It’s lots of fun!

Khadija, when you go to boarding school, you will meet new friends and learn new ideas about life. But listen to your mother: don’t get a boyfriend. Don’t go down that path. Study hard and reach your potential, for yourself and your family.

Hi! I’m Tadala, and this is Fyress.

Well, we’re all from different parts of Malawi, so we have fun sharing our different dialects and cultures with each other.

Hey Khadija, when you go to boarding school you will meet new friends and learn new ideas about life. But listen to your mother: don’t get a boyfriend. Don’t go down that path. Study hard and reach your potential, for yourself and your family.

Hey Khadija, we’re going to play netball. I don’t know how to play that. Go girl!

Come on, we’ll teach you. It’s lots of fun!

Even though I was having a terrific time with my new friends, I kept my promise to my mother and studied hard. My family was depending on me!
I'm glad we're having a party at the lake today. I've been studying too much!

Yeah it's nice to relax... and to meet boys!

So you attend the girls' boarding school?

Hi, I'm Dulani. What are your names?

Oh! Tadala, I'm Khadija. I'm Fyress

Hi! Let's at least make new friends!

So Khadija, I saw you and Dulani sitting together. Are you interested in him?

Don't make me blush Fyress!

Hey Khadija! I'm so happy to see you again. I've been thinking about you a lot since the lake. You're so beautiful and nice. I want you to be my girl.

I think we should be together, and I think you think so too.

Well, let me think about it. I'll meet you back here in two weeks and give you my answer.

Oh, Dulani. I don't know. School keeps me so busy.

I've been thinking about you a lot since the lake. You're so beautiful and nice. I want you to be my girl.

I think we should be together, and I think you think so too.

But Fyress, nothing like that. I've just been going on walks to clear my head.

I'm happy you are giving us a chance Khadija. These two weeks were the longest of my life!

You're so pretty. I want to see your face every day.

Well I think you're beautiful.

So where have you been sneaking off to this last month Khadija? Have a secret boyfriend or something?

Eh? Um, nothing like that. I've just been going on walks to clear my head.

Now that you've been my girlfriend for some time I think we should sleep together.

Boyfriends and girlfriends can sleep together too. It's natural.

Oh, Dulani I want to make you happy, but I don't want to do that.

WHAT?

You mean like man and wife?

This is something you should do as a girlfriend to make me happy!

I didn't know having a boyfriend means I have to sleep with him...

I'm sorry I got so angry at you last week, but I expected you would want to be with me.

I do want to be with you, but I didn't know I had to do that to be with you.

If you love me, you will do this. Look, I even brought a condom. You don't have to worry about anything. I will take care of you.

Umm, well, I do love you Dulani.

Good, then come with me.

You're just saying that. No one's told me I'm pretty before.

Ha! Let's at least make new friends.

After the lake party I was so busy with my schoolwork that I didn't go out much. Sometimes I'd go to the market for a break and get little things like fruits or relishes.

I'm Tadala

I'm Khadija

I'm Fyress
Nobody had ever talked to me about sex before. It was very confusing. I didn’t even know what a condom was or how to use it. I trusted Dulani to keep me safe. I was afraid to tell anyone about sleeping with Dulani. I really wanted advice. I wanted to ask the other girls what they knew about sex, but I was afraid they would be disappointed in me.

I didn’t know much about abortion, but I heard that if you abort a child you may never get pregnant again or maybe even die. Now I know that isn’t correct, but I thought I couldn’t take that chance.

So what’s new with you Khadija?

My friends told me if you’ve just had your, you know, your woman thing, then you don’t have to use a condom.

Now girls, to prepare for your final exams you must…

55, 56, 57… can that be right? It’s almost been two months since my last period!

Trust me Khadija, I will take care you.

I had mine last week, but is that safe?

I’m so nervous for our exams tomorrow!

I’m not looking forward to going home for our summer break.

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I didn’t know much about abortion, but I heard that if you abort a child you may never get pregnant again or maybe even die. Now I know that isn’t correct, but I thought I couldn’t take that chance.

Dulani, I have to tell you something. I, uh, I am pregnant. I’ve been pregnant for five months.

It’s impossible! You must be mistaken.

It’s true, I am positive.

You have to abort!

I don’t want to abort! What if this is my only chance to have a child?

Then it will be your responsibility.

I can’t abort my baby. What if this is my only chance to have a child?

It will be your responsibility.

You seem different my daughter. Your body shape and complexion… you’ve changed so much.

Is there anything you want to tell me?

No mother, everything is fine. Nothing has changed.

There are so many things I can’t tell! I feel so helpless and lost.

WHAT?

How is that possible? We used condoms.

Not every time…
Today I want you to go see your sister. She's working at the hospital now, so go meet her there. Yes mother, I'll be happy to see her.

I know this is difficult to talk about, but mother believes you are pregnant. You're here today to have an exam.

Oh, oh. Oh, no, no. Khadija what have you done?

Mother, you're finally up! Where are you going? Your sister and I are going to your father's family. We need their help.

Yes mother, I'll be happy to see her. I know this is difficult to talk about, but mother believes you are pregnant. You're here today to have an exam.

Khadija, is six months pregnant. She couldn't tell you because she thought you would be ashamed of her.

Oh! No, no, no. Khadija, what have you done?

Mother, Khadija is six months pregnant. She couldn't tell you because she thought you would be ashamed of her.

Oh, no, no, no. Khadija what have you done?

Oh, no, no, no. Khadija what have you done?

Mother, what have you done?

Oh, no, no, no. Khadija what have you done?

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Oh, no, no, no. Khadija what have you done?
Yes, these girls are children themselves. Look at this child. How is she going to give birth?

Welcome to our family, little one.

You must press your daughter to marry my son. Then we can't help you with the baby. He is your responsibility now.

It is Khadija's choice. I support her decision to go back to school.

It is Khadija's choice. I support her decision to go back to school.

I want to return to school, mother.

We need to return to our home. My other children are alone and unprotected.

If you promise to take responsibility, you can take her and the baby home.

That baby is still weak from being born early. She should stay here for a month.

I have no choice. I can't leave Khadija here alone, but I have other younger children who need me home.

If you promise to take responsibility, you can take her and the baby home.

Khadija, what is your plan? If you want to get married don't cheat me. But if you insist to return to school, then I will bring you home and help you.

We need to return to our home. My other children are alone and unprotected.

I have no choice. I can't leave Khadija here alone, but I have other younger children who need me home.

If you promise to take responsibility, you can take her and the baby home.

That baby is still weak from being born early. She should stay here for a month.

I want to return to school, mother.

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Do you want to hold him?

I was in the middle of life and death. When it was over and we were both ok I was so happy, but I also wasn't happy because I believed my future was doomed.

I knew I was too young for that life. If I married Dulani I would never learn more or find a proper job. I would just be Dulani's wife, and with neither of us graduating secondary school, we would always struggle.
I wanted to go back to school, but I had to care for my baby and couldn’t return to the boarding school, so I lost my scholarship. I was so unhappy.

Ah, great. I am the executive director of a grassroots organization called Lozi Youth Organization, supported by the Nkhotakota AIDS Support Organization. I wanted to go back to school, but I had to care for my baby and couldn’t return to the boarding school, so I lost my scholarship. I was so unhappy.

All the old problems came back: no school fees and not enough food. To add to that, I had to provide for my son. All the old problems came back: no school fees and not enough food. To add to that, I had to provide for my son.

I knew my future would be brighter if I could start over again. How are you going to return to school Khadija? Martin is almost a year old. If you don’t return to school soon it will be too late.

I don’t know mother. There are so many obstacles.

Yes, I’m Khadija.

Oh? That would be a great opportunity for me. Please come in.

Thank you.

Hello? I’m looking for Khadija.

We are trying to identify all the girls in this area who are not in school due to having an early pregnancy. Your village chief identified you. We want to help you return to school.

So Khadija, do you want to return to school?

Did you know early pregnancy is a common problem in Malawi? We want girls to know they have support to go back to school, gain an education and provide a better life for their family.

As a peer educator you will learn how to prevent early pregnancy with trainings in decision-making, assertiveness and self-esteem. We will also train you in STIs, HIV and girls’ rights. And what would my responsibilities be?

After the training, you will go to the various Girls’ Corner clubs to share your story. You will be a cautionary tale, but you will also help girls understand how to say no to men and stay in school. Are you interested?

Yes!

Oh!

Oh! We will support you to go back to school, but we also want something from you.

Oh!

We want to train you to be a peer educator for our Girls’ Corner program TSOGOLO LANGA (My Future).

Yes!

I know my future would be brighter if I could start over again.
To reach the most hidden and at-risk girls, the Nkhatabay AIDS Support Organization (NASO) partnered with four smaller grassroots organizations to create Girls' Corner Clubs in schools and community centers. While educating girls about pregnancy and HIV is vital, creating real change in girls' lives is slow due to poverty. To confront poverty and the need for girls to earn their own money to pay their secondary school fees, Girls' corners teach girls home crafts, like knitting and sewing school uniforms, that can be sold in their communities. However, the need for materials and equipment, like sewing machines, is a persistent problem.

Thanks to the success of the outreach campaigns, membership is growing and parents are encouraging their daughters to join the Girls' Corners. But with increased membership comes increased need for materials, school and sports uniforms, home craft equipment and most importantly school fees so Girls can stay in school.

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A girl’s life doesn’t transform without the support of her family and community. So Girls’ Corners organize community awareness programs on the challenges adolescent girls face and encourage parents to spread the message.

NASO’s financial and program support of the LOZ Youth Organization helped them develop Girls’ Corners and also identify and train 20 peer educators, including Khadija. Peer educators are empowered through trainings on decision making, assertiveness, self esteem, HIV/AIDS, effective communication and human and gender rights.

Once trained, the girls go to various Girls’ Corners to share their experiences and new knowledge and to open up and one-on-one mentoring. Peer educators also go out into the community to encourage out-of-school girls to return.

Girls aged 10-19 are encouraged to attend Girls’ Corner meetings. Activities usually take place in the afternoon and include sports, empowerment training, discussions about reproductive health, safe sex and HIV, peer mentoring, debates, theater and vocational skill training.

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Today we’re going to talk about girl empowerment and preventing early pregnancy.

Girl empowerment is when a girl is given the power and strength to make her own choices, to be able to say no if a man is pressuring her for sex and to be able to demand to stay in school.

Let’s talk about some strategies for preventing pregnancy. Your first line of defense is just coming to Girls’ Corner meetings. If you’re spending your free time here, then you’re not out chatting with boys. Here we can share new ideas and help each other be strong to prevent these problems. What are some other ideas?

My boyfriend and I are never alone, so we can’t give into temptation. We always plan activities with friends.

Has he ever pressured you to have sex?

Well, once he asked me over text message, but I reminded him that we both have goals. We have not reached those goals yet, so we need to stay strong.

That’s great! Reminding each other of your goals, like staying in secondary school, going to college and getting a career, is a great way to stay on the right path.

I worked so hard to get laundry from all the houses and to the washing before school. So when I got to class I was so tired.

I found out I was pregnant when I saw my period. I thought that I had caught this man and he would take care of me. But when I told him, he denied it was his and said that he saw me with other men. I got very worried then that this man had cheated me.

When I found out I was pregnant I thought that I had caught this man and he would take care of me. But when I told him, he denied it was his and said that he saw me with other men. I got very worried then that this man had cheated me.

That’s a great way to stay strong and to keep on the right path.

I used to wash clothes for women, but then I realized that they only paid me a child’s wage. That’s why I decided to go to school.

I learned how a man can change. Now I am trying to go back to school, but let me tell you girls it is very hard to earn enough for school fees when you have a baby!

You have all heard about my challenges, but today I have another peer educator with us who is going to share her story. Please welcome Zione!
I am learning sewing through the Girls’ Corner though, so I hope I will be able to find work as a tailor and save some money to return to school next year.

There are different ways that girls can fall off the right path into pregnancy, but once that happens our challenges are the same.

You have to have the heart to stay in school and not get pregnant or married young.

Even if you think your life is difficult now, think about how difficult it would be with a child who depends on you. So stay strong and stay in school, don’t think a man will solve your problems!

I must study hard to achieve my dream of becoming an accountant. I will be able to support my mother and my child then!

If you don’t have basic necessities you must learn a skill, like we do at Girls’ Corner, and not go looking for a man. With an education and good skills you can take charge of your future.

Every night I tell him stories about my life and what I want for him.

And then you’ll grow to be a big, smart boy!

Finishing school is the first step to giving myself and my son a good life. I will teach him to be independent and stand on his own by example.

And then you’ll grow to be a big, smart boy!

I feel off the path. I didn’t have access to the information that we are sharing with you, but I know struggling to return to school is my best option now.

There are different ways that girls can fall off the right path into pregnancy, but once that happens our challenges are the same.

I’m lucky that my mother cares for Martin while I am at school.

Every night I tell him stories about my life and what I want for him.

I will teach him to be independent and stand on his own by example.

And then you’ll grow to be a big, smart boy!

I must study hard to achieve my dream of becoming an accountant. I will be able to support my mother and my child then!
WHY WE LOVE GRASSROOTS ORGANIZATIONS

CONSIDER: Marginalized by cultural practices, poverty and discrimination, girls are often outside the reach of larger development projects led by governments and international aid agencies. Grassroots organizations are smaller and created by members of the community to address specific problems. Familiar with the local language, culture and challenges that shape girls’ lives, grassroots organizations are uniquely equipped to address girls’ urgent needs and create effective solutions. They also stay put, and offer girls support for the long run.

ASK: How does NASO address the problems of Malawi’s adolescent girls, especially teenagers who become pregnant?

DISCUSS: An organization from outside of Malawi tried to support teen moms in return to school, how would it be different? What might work and what wouldn’t work?

WHY WE LOVE GIRL POWER

CONSIDER: Bands in the 1990s like Bikini Kill and the Spice Girls made the phrase “girl power” popular, but we’re not talking about pop culture. Girl power means “girl power” popular, but we’re not talking about pop culture. Girl power means having the tools to fight for your rights and support others. That’s amazing! But girls are still facing exploitation and injustice. Girls in poverty, navigating the tricky years of adolescence, face additional challenges like child marriage, early pregnancy and violence.

ASK: What are the challenges that are most pressing for Malawi’s girls? How are NASO’s Girls’ Comers spreading girl power?

DISCUSS: What problem in your community can you confront with girl power to create a positive solution?

WHY WE LOVE SAFE SPACES FOR GIRLS

CONSIDER: Safe spaces are all about building strong connections so girls can get the support they need to navigate the emotional and physical challenges of being a teenager. This means they become better equipped to avoid or deal with the negative experiences that threaten to derail girls in adolescence: dropping out of school, getting forced into having sex, getting pregnant or getting married too early. Safe spaces are where girls find friends, mentors and skills to stay in school.

ASK: Why do Malawi’s girls need safe spaces and Girls’ Comers? How did the Girls’ Comer transform Khadija’s life?

DISCUSS: Are there any spaces just for girls in your community? If so, why are these spaces special to you or your friends? If not, how would your life be better if you had access to an all-girl space?