

## Her Classroom Was Almost Lost Now She Is Training to Teach

In the quiet rural village of Kafulama in Mchinji District, where long dusty paths cut through maize fields and poverty often interrupts children's dreams, a young girl named Gladys Luciano held tightly to one powerful hope ***"to complete her education and one day uplift her community. Gladys' journey, however, began with profound loss."*** She lost both her parents at a young age and was raised by her grandmother, a resilient woman who became the sole pillar of her upbringing and education despite overwhelming hardship.

Gladys was a bright and disciplined learner from Kafulama Primary School. During her upper primary years, when her grandmother's limited means could no longer fully sustain her schooling, a compassionate primary school teacher, Ms. Makawano, stepped in. From Standard 7 when Gladys was on the edge of dropping out until she sat for her Primary School Leaving Certificate Examination (PSLCE) in Standard 8, Ms. Makawano took Gladys into her own home, ensuring she had shelter, guidance, and the stability needed to remain in school. Her teachers admired her commitment to learning and her strong determination to succeed. Coming from a household that depended entirely on small-scale farming, education was not guaranteed. Her grandmother struggled daily to put food on the table through small-scale farming, making school fees and learning materials an almost impossible burden. Yet, despite these challenges, she never gave up on Gladys' education.



Picture 1. Gladys Luciano Smiling

For several years, Gladys remained in school only because of a bursary supported by the Member of Parliament (MP) for her constituency. That support became her lifeline. It enabled her to successfully complete primary school and secure selection to Mchinji Secondary School as a boarding student an achievement that filled her family and community with pride.

However, at the beginning of her Form 2, Gladys' world suddenly collapsed. The school administration informed her that her school fees had not been paid. Days passed, then weeks, with no response from the MP's office. Eventually, the school advised her that she would be forced to stop attending classes if the fees were not settled.

For Gladys, the possibility of leaving school was devastating. The thought of returning home while her classmates continued learning was unbearable. She feared becoming yet another girl in her village whose education ended prematurely not because of lack of ability, but because of poverty. Her dreams began to fade into silence.

It was at this critical moment that Girls Activist Youth Organisation (GAYO) intervened. After learning about Gladys' situation, GAYO conducted a rapid assessment and confirmed the urgent risk of school dropout. Recognising that this was not just a financial challenge but a systemic gap in support for vulnerable girls, GAYO acted decisively.

GAYO provided school uniforms and essential learning materials, ensuring Gladys could continue attending classes with dignity and confidence. Beyond material support, the organisation took a bold step into advocacy and lobbying. GAYO formally engaged the Ward Councillor to present Gladys' case and highlight the broader challenges faced by vulnerable girls in the area. The organisation also followed up with the Member of Parliament, advocating for the reinstatement and continuity of her bursary support.

This multi-level advocacy approach ensured that Gladys was not only supported in the short term, but also protected from future disruption to her education.



Picture 2. Gladys Working in the collidor of her Primary school

With renewed support, Gladys returned to school this time with a restored sense of hope. Dressed in her uniform and equipped with school materials, she committed herself fully to her studies. She worked harder than ever, determined not to waste the second chance she had been given.

Reflecting on her journey, Gladys speaks with deep gratitude. In her own words, she says she *will never forget her primary school teacher*, because without that support she would not have completed her primary school education. She also speaks proudly of her grandmother, whose sacrifices kept her going even when the odds were stacked against her.

Today, Gladys' perseverance has paid off. She has successfully completed secondary school and is now in her first year at Mchinji Teachers Training College. Her journey, however, is still marked by struggle. To raise funds for her first semester tuition, Gladys undertook small piecework jobs, demonstrating extraordinary determination. As she prepares to enter her second semester, she admits she is uncertain about where the tuition fees will come from but this fear has not weakened her resolve to pursue her studies. Her journey stands as a powerful testament to what targeted support, strong advocacy, and community engagement can achieve.



*Picture 3. Gladys Grand Mother*

Gladys' grandmother, speaking with emotion, shares that she is deeply proud to see her granddaughter in college despite the many hardships they have faced. She describes Gladys' achievement as a victory not only for their family, but for every vulnerable girl who dares to dream beyond circumstance.

Gladys' story reflects the true impact of Girls Activist Youth Organisation (GAYO) an organisation that goes beyond handouts to address the root causes of school dropout among girls. By combining material support with strategic advocacy and collaboration with local leaders, GAYO is keeping girls in school and turning vulnerability into opportunity.

In districts like Mchinji, where many girls remain at risk of dropping out due to poverty, Gladys' success is a clear reminder to donors and partners that one well-coordinated intervention can change the entire trajectory of a young person's life.

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