

# Agency & Empowerment: An Assessment of AGE Africa's CHATS Girls' Club Program in Southern Malawi

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*“CHATS gives you courage to speak in public. I have benefitted a lot from that...[Before CHATS] I was so shy and afraid to speak in public.” ---CHATS Participant*

CHATS: Creating Healthy Approaches to Success is a two-year after school program active at 21 secondary schools in Malawi's Southern region, and serving 650 girls, as of September 2015. Until 2013, CHATS was an AGE Africa program delivered exclusively in conjunction with comprehensive scholarships for needy girls. In the 2013-2014 school year, AGE Africa began offering CHATS independently from scholarships at select rural secondary schools as an extracurricular girls' club open to all girls enrolled at the school. This assessment of the CHATS program was initiated in order to understand the impact of the CHATS on girls' educational and livelihood outcomes in a broad sense, but specifically to understand the comparative impact of CHATS on girls with scholarships and without. It was AGE Africa's intention to use the findings of this assessment to make the case for the CHATS program pilot at scale in Malawi. The specific research question posed was as follows:

*What impact does CHATS have on girls' aspirations, empowerment and school retention and achievement? What is the comparative impact of AGE Africa CHATS program on girls' aspirations, school retention and achievement in scholarship (CHATS "Plus") as compared to non-scholarship participants (CHATS-only)?*

## **Key Findings:**

- CHATS participants' had extraordinarily high secondary school completion rates compared to the national average (88% and higher, compared to less than 50% of girls who enroll in school nationwide).
- Increased leadership skills and voice, was a clear benefit for all participants. In many cases this also coincided with an increased capacity for self-advocacy.
- CHATS participants clearly demonstrated an enhanced knowledge and understanding of gender equity than comparison students.
- Participants demonstrated significant gains in knowledge of SRH—but not in terms of how to access SRH services, or more technical content of reproduction.
- Participants emphasized an increased capacity to avoid peer pressure and romantic relationships.

# Portrait of the AGE Africa Student

AGE Africa serves some of Malawi's poorest young women with educational opportunities, leadership training and life skills programs that result in 88% of AGE Africa's students completing secondary school - compared to 6% of girls nationwide.



**43%** of AGE Africa's beneficiaries are single or double orphans.



**42%** of AGE Africa's students walk 6 km or more each way to school (with half of those walking over 11 km each way).



The average AGE Africa student has **5.5** siblings.



**80%** of AGE Africa recipients report going to bed hungry on a regular basis.



**96%** of AGE Africa's beneficiaries are first-generation high school attendees.

## The AGE Africa Difference



In Malawi, less than 6% of girls nationwide will finish high school, but 88% of AGE Africa's scholarship students will complete all four years of secondary school.

## Introduction

*“In the past we thought that girls cannot achieve what boys achieve. I get encouraged to aim high. ...I have learned that I can do better in class than boys.” --AGE Africa CHATS participant*

Malawi is a highly patriarchal society with high levels of gender-based violence, early marriage and pregnancy. Sixty-five percent of women in Malawi age 24-49 have become mothers by age 20, and Malawi boasts one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world with 1 in 2 girls married by the age of 18 (National Statistical Office (NSO) & ICF Macro, 2011). Only 6% of women have completed secondary school nationwide (National Statistical Office (NSO) & ICF Macro, 2011). In this context, girls’ require more than simple access to education in order to overcome the barriers to finishing their secondary educations and to successfully transition to life beyond school. AGE Africa’s CHATS program is designed specifically to equip and empower girls with the skills, knowledge, and attitudes they will need to leverage their educations into hopeful futures. This soft-skills approach to girls’ educational attainment is unique, but one that is necessary in extremely difficult contexts like Malawi. CHATS seeks to combat two of the leading causes of girls’ dropout (early marriage and early pregnancy), by engaging girls’ in participatory programs that enhance their leadership skills and agency while helping them fill critical information gaps about their health, futures, and livelihood opportunities. CHATS’ unique application of participatory methodologies to issues of child marriage, pregnancy and keeping girls’ in school, is part of what makes it an innovative approach.

This assessment represents a mid-line evaluation of AGE Africa’s CHATS program, approximately one year after baseline<sup>1</sup>. It compares the impact of CHATS on girls who receive an AGE Africa scholarship (‘scholars’) and girls who are participant in CHATS without an AGE Africa scholarship (CHATS-only participants). The assessment of the AGE Africa CHATS program relied on both quantitative monitoring data and primary qualitative data collected in the field (interviews and focus group discussions). These data were collected across three groups, CHATS-Only, scholars, and for the qualitative data analysis only, a very small comparison group. CHATS-only refer to participants from government secondary day schools (CDSS schools) who voluntarily enrolled in the after-school CHATS program and ‘Scholars’ refers to participants who enrolled in CHATS as part of their scholarship through AGE Africa. CHATS-only participants and scholars attended different schools in all cases. The International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) conducted quantitative analysis of AGE Africa’s monitoring data, and collected all qualitative data from the field in March 2015. ICRW’s findings were supplemented by year-end exam scores and completion rates collected by AGE Africa in August 2015 across both cohorts.

## Intervention

*“I thought it was only for a man to make decisions but when I came to CHATS I learned that women can make family decisions too.” --CHATS participant*

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<sup>1</sup> Although some study participants had engaged in up to 1.5 years of programming, while some scholarship participants had been in the program up to two years.

## CHATS—Creating Healthy Approaches to Success

AGE Africa’s earliest programming focused on providing comprehensive scholarships to needy girls. AGE Africa learned quickly that scholarships alone are not enough to keep the most disadvantaged young women in school in a country where gender norms exert enormous social, emotional and economic pressure on girls to dropout. In order to improve girls’ educational outcomes in this environment, girls must be **empowered with the agency and resources** they need to stay healthy, safe, and in control of their decisions and futures. In this context, AGE Africa defines “resources,” as the critical skills and knowledge that girls need to stay healthy, safe and in school. We define ‘agency’ as “the belief that one has the ability to make and act upon strategic life choices.” The definition of empowerment and agency are taken from several scholars aptly summarized in the recent ICRW publication “More Power to Her” (Warner, Stobenau & Glinski, 5). Using agency and voice as the foundation of its work, CHATS is a two year girls’ club curriculum aimed at empowering girls with the agency, knowledge, and skills they need to stay in school and transition successfully work or higher education.

AGE Africa’s CHATS program is guided by three primary objectives with the following core skills and knowledge areas identified as the critical components of each:

1. Improve girls’ retention and achievement in secondary school.
  - a. **Key knowledge:** sexual and reproductive health (SRH), livelihood/career opportunities
  - b. **Enhanced Skills:** study and organizational skills
2. Empower girls to become agents of change in their own lives
  - a. **Key knowledge:** SRH, gender equity and gender rights, self-esteem
  - b. **Enhanced skills:** group facilitation, public speaking, self-advocacy, critical thinking and self-esteem.
3. Improve girls’ post-secondary transitions.
  - a. **Key knowledge:** careers and educational pathways
  - b. **Enhanced skills:** entrepreneurship<sup>2</sup>

The CHATS program is supported by a rigorous monitoring and evaluation strategy that continually helps AGE Africa to assess the program’s strength and impact. Based on both quantitative and qualitative data sets, AGE Africa’s M&E strategy constantly informs the program and the organization’s decision making. A combination of quantitative assessment tools (pre-post tests, and end-term surveys) are collected alongside qualitative data from student and key stakeholder (faculty & parent) interviews and focus groups. These data are then supplemented with primary source data from the schools (attendance records, term grades, dropout/completion rates, exam scores), as it is available.

Although the project is still mid-cycle and ultimate impact won’t be known for several years, this initial assessment specifically helps AGE Africa understand progress that is being made, and challenges faced, on all three objectives with a specific focus on objectives 1 and 2.

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<sup>2</sup> Please note this assessment does not include girls’ entrepreneurship skills, as this component of the program had not yet been delivered at the time of the study.

As mentioned, CHATS achieves these objectives through a combination of knowledge and skills building. The content of the program is organized as follows:

- **Year 1: Leadership, Gender, and Sexual & Reproductive Health**—In year one participants are trained as group facilitators and public speakers through a weekend intensive training. Throughout the next two years, girls are then asked to lead CHATS sessions in facilitator teams with their peers, supported by alumnae mentors, who help them improve their facilitation skills, and deliver difficult core content. The content areas covered in year one include sexual and reproductive health (SRH), gender, gender rights, and gender based violence awareness and prevention.
- **Year 2: Tertiary Transitions**—Year 2 of CHATS focuses on post-secondary transitions and skills building through entrepreneurship training, education on how to access tertiary education, and vocational school, as well as the core requirements for high school graduation. In a 2013 survey of incoming CHATS participants, 99% of girls could not even correctly identify the minimum requirements for graduation.<sup>3</sup>

All CHATS clubs are supported and coached by Faculty Advisors who are teachers at each school where the program is active. Faculty Advisors undergo intensive training in the CHATS curriculum, the principals of facilitation and ‘coaching’ and psychosocial support. The Faculty Advisors in turn work closely with AGE Africa Program Coordinators who are part of the hands-on delivery mechanism. Throughout both years of the CHATS program, participants are exposed to women role models who serve as ‘guest speakers’ reinforcing critical topics in the curriculum.

CHATS’ peer-led approach puts girls as front-line experts and problem solvers on issues that affect their lives. One of CHATS’ key innovations is the use of group facilitation as the key skill utilized to build girls’ own agency. Participants learn core leadership competencies and are offered a space to practice and utilize those skill-sets as the primary avenue for building their self-confidences over the course of two years.

While participation is not a new strategy for promoting empowerment, it is a new application of this methodology for combatting early marriage and early pregnancy. In becoming trained facilitators and peer mentors of the CHATS program, girls’ are developing the self-advocacy skills they need to negotiate marriage on their own terms with their families and future husbands.

The combined focus on SRH, gender rights AND post-secondary transitions further strengthens the model. In Malawi, government schools do not house information about higher education, vocational opportunities, or offer business training programs. This information does not exist at the school level, and unless families have other children who have matriculated to higher education or vocational school, there is no way for girls or their guardians to know and understand what education opportunities exist beyond secondary school. Furthermore, young women who graduate and return to their homes find

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<sup>3</sup> Please note that this assessment was conducted for most participants at the end of ‘year 1’ so much of the year 2 conduct had yet to be delivered.

themselves un-equipped to translate their secondary educations into earned income. Through CHATS, girls will have already developed the skills they need to be successful in pursuit of economic and/or continuing educational opportunities.

### Cost Effectiveness

CHATS is low-cost and high impact. Based on initial budget projections of the program **at scale in Malawi**, AGE Africa estimates that it will cost approximately \$200-\$250, per girl, per year, to deploy at rural government schools throughout Malawi. The recent Population Council study on what works to delay Child Marriage shows that the cost of similarly comprehensive initiatives in Tanzania was approximately \$117 per girl, per year for thousands of beneficiaries (Erulkar, 2015). However, overall cost effectiveness in Malawi is likely much greater, given the comparatively high rates of child marriage in Malawi AND the much higher cost of doing business in a landlocked nation. The Tanzania intervention was implemented in a region where there is 8% prevalence of child marriage of girls aged 12-17. *In Malawi the prevalence of child marriage is almost 50% for girls by age 18* (National Statistical Office (NSO) & ICF Macro, 2011). Early results of the CHATS program detailed in this report show that CHATS will make a significant contribution towards keeping girls' in school and equipping them with the skills they need to delay marriage.

### Replicability & Scalability

In 2013, CHATS was recognized by the Malawi Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MOEST) as a priority intervention for improving girls' retention in secondary school and improving gender equity in the public schooling system. In the last two years, AGE Africa has continued to work closely with our Ministry partners to refine the curriculum and delivery model. By 2016, AGE Africa is on track to have CHATS adopted as an official supplemental life skills curriculum by the MOEST which will then open up new funding opportunities and government in-kind support of the project.

In 2014, CHATS was invited by the Clinton Global Initiative to join their girls' education commitment called CHARGE (Collaborative Harnessing Ambition and Resources for Girls' Education). Through CHARGE, AGE Africa has committed to scaling CHATS to serve 12,000 girls in Malawi in the next 5 years. It is AGE Africa's plan that the coming 5 years, will provide the data and the experience to make the case for replication of the CHATS program in countries beyond Malawi.

In many ways the Malawian context is an acute microcosm of the situation girls' face in many other places in Southern Africa. However, Malawi's landlocked geography, relative poverty compared to its neighbors, and appalling statistics for child marriage and girls' education make it an excellent testing ground for programs that work. If it works in Malawi, implications for success in neighboring countries like Zambia, Zimbabwe, Tanzania and others, is incredibly promising.

Since December of 2014, AGE Africa's senior management has worked to draft a scaling strategy for scale of the CHATS program in Malawi. The process has included multiple stakeholder meetings in Malawi with government Ministries, curriculum experts, and partner NGOs; focus group discussions with community members, school faculty and administrators; and multiple consultations with experts in the

field. In February 2015, AGE Africa’s Country Director traveled to Uganda to conduct site visits with peer organizations in process of scale to learn best practices from them. The scaling strategy incorporates lessons learned and initial results of this midline assessment, alongside stakeholder feedback for some significant program changes in favor of enhanced outcomes. AGE Africa plans to launch this strategy through a phased approach beginning September 2015. Critical to AGE Africa’s success will be securing the right funding partnerships.

## Impact

Qualitative data indicated that overall CHATS participants perceived the following benefits resulting directly from participation in the CHATS program: noticeable improvements in public speaking, both in school and in other community-based activities; improved performance in school; and a stronger capacity to avoid relationships with boys. While there was some variation in outcomes between CHATS only and scholarship cohorts on the quality of knowledge acquisition in core content areas, generally participants across the board expressed having benefitted from CHATS’ leadership skills building component. (ICRW) Quantitative evidence additionally shows that secondary school completion rates of CHATS participants at AGE Africa school partners ranged from 75%-96%, compared to less than 50% of those who enroll in school nationwide, indicating a significant contribution to participants’ educational outcomes<sup>4</sup>. (AGE Africa)

### Evidence of Changes in Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices in CHATS Participants:

The ICRW team reviewed the evidence of impact of the CHATS program on its beneficiaries, drawing on quantitative and qualitative data to compare results for scholars to CHATS-only participants across four key thematic areas: sexual and reproductive health, leadership and self-advocacy, gender beliefs including women’s rights, and future aspirations. These findings are grouped below to show progress made towards AGE Africa’s three core objectives, and are combined with quantitative evidence from primary source data on retention gathered in August 2015 by AGE Africa’s M&E team.

#### 1. Objective 1: Improve girls’ retention and achievement in secondary school

##### **Retention:**<sup>5</sup>

- Scholarship recipients attending rural day schools demonstrated a 75% completion rate in secondary school, which is 25 percentage points higher than the national average of <50%. Data was calculated cumulatively over the past three years.
- CHATS –only participants had 96% secondary school completion rate in the first year of the program—which indicates that retention over the course of multiple years will decrease some (this data is only for participants completing one year), but AGE Africa is hopeful that it will remain significantly above the national average as time goes on.

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<sup>4</sup> Since CHATS is a voluntary program, it is also possible that there may be some self-selection bias, in other words, girls who are more committed to school *may* self-select into the program. However, it is also true that AGE Africa has some school partners where nearly 100% of girls enrolled participate in CHATS. Even with a self-selection bias, we still feel that this is a significant achievement.

<sup>5</sup> No achievement data is yet available.

### **Knowledge & Skills Acquisition:**

- Study Skills, Performance and Aspirations: The participants showed a significantly improved understanding of future career opportunities and educational pathways after one year in CHATS. While there was no significant evidence of changed study *habits* in school, there was some evidence of improved academic outcomes in some subjects, with worse outcomes in others. The qualitative findings emphasized participants' perception that CHATS had improved their study habits and overall school performance—even though the researchers were unable to verify that evidence with the quantitative data.
  - *Comparison Chats-only V. Scholars*: The quantitative findings only show evidence of improvements in academic performance in the subject of mathematics for CHATS-only participants. Scholars tended to highlight this benefit from CHATS more so than CHATS-only participants in the qualitative data, but it was mentioned in both groups. Also there was some evidence of girls' scores decreasing in certain subjects like Life Skills—which may be explained by the clear variance in the CHATS SRH curriculum and the National life skills program, or a result of the variance of school-performance data.<sup>6</sup>
- Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH): Quantitative findings suggested that knowledge of family planning methods increased as well as knowledge about ways to prevent STIs, particularly for CHATS-only, but also for a combined sample of Scholars and CHATS-only students. The qualitative data raised concerns about the comprehension of some of the more technical SRH material and highlighted distinctions on reporting of romantic relationships by participants.
  - *Comparison CHATS-only v. Scholars*: While CHATS was overwhelmingly described as an environment that discouraged girls from having boyfriends, this appears to be an extension of messaging being delivered through implicit, and sometimes explicit school policy unrelated to CHATS. The messaging was stronger amongst Scholars than it was CHATS only participants, however emphasis on the importance of avoiding boyfriends in order to succeed in school was pervasive even amongst comparison girls.

### **2. Objective 2: Empower girls to become agents of change in their own lives.**

*“...before AGE Africa, maybe the boys would do something to us and I was just quiet. The boys were thinking that maybe I was hoping for them, unlike now, whenever they speak, I also stand up and speak back to them.” –CHATS scholar*

### **Knowledge & Skills Acquisition:**

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<sup>6</sup> Because school academic performance data is both difficult to obtain and extremely variable in its quality, AGE Africa has determined that it will not likely continue to review term-student academic scores as part of its monitoring, but rather will rely on national examination scores primarily moving forward.

- Leadership and Self-Advocacy and Advocacy on Others' Behalf: The qualitative findings suggest that leadership, voice and overcoming shyness were perceived to be among the most important benefits from the CHATS program by both students and faculty advisors. The majority of girls showed significant improvements in public speaking, group facilitation, assertiveness (self-advocacy) and decision-making. The quantitative evidence showed that these skills began to translate into *some* behavior change in year one. CHATS girls were more likely to see themselves as leaders and role models, and were more likely at post-test to confide in someone when harmed or threatened. Scholars showed a significant increase of self-advocating during instances of insult. The quote from a CHATS participant below is indicative of the qualitative findings around public speaking, leadership, and voice:

*"I was shy to speak in public before AGE, I was shivering in front of people but when I saw my friends facilitating in AGE I also go courage that I can do it too." ---CHATS Participant*

- Comparison CHATS-only v. Scholars: The quantitative evidence also shows a few areas of variation between Scholars and CHATS-only participants. Specifically, CHATS only students showed higher overall gain in their perceptions of self as a leader, whereas Scholars tended to already possess a high degree of self-assessment as a leader at baseline. While participants across the board improved their self-advocacy with peers, and at school, Scholars specifically showed a significant decrease in participating in discussions with elders; while no change is seen for CHATS-only participants. However, the quantitative data showed that scholars became significantly more likely than CHATS only participants to self-advocate in situations of personal insult; while CHATS only participants were found significantly more likely to seek advice if pressured to do something they did not want to do. These findings indicate that perhaps there is some implementation deviation between CHATS-only schools v. scholarship schools.
- Women's Rights and Gender Equity: The findings on gender and women's rights show that girls generally improved their understanding of gender and gender inequalities and adopted more progressive beliefs. Both CHATS-only and scholars were more likely than comparison girls to express awareness of gender inequalities, as well as shifts toward more progressive gendered beliefs, particularly concerning academic achievement, and gendered decision-making in the domestic sphere. It is AGE Africa's hope that with additional time in the CHATS program, the majority of girls will be able to express their understanding of the issue as well as this CHATS participant:

*"gender in-equity is unequal sharing of work to boys and girls. For example let's say that like here at school, a boy and a girl are both late and the teacher says that a girl should just pick out the rubbish then go to school while the boy should take a hoe and dig the place. While gender equality is distributing jobs equally to a boy and a girl" ---CHATS Scholars*

### 3. Improve girls' post-secondary transitions<sup>7</sup>

#### **Knowledge Acquisition:**

- Future aspirations and career preparedness: The quantitative analysis of academic requirements and career aspirations showed among all participants exposed to the material showed an increase in knowledge of possible careers and an increase in the number of post-secondary schools they could name. While scholars addressed academic benefits from CHATS more than CHATS-only; aspirations and orientation toward careers were similar across the groups. They also shared a more expanded set of possible career choices as compared to non-participants. Finally, while there were certainly exceptions, participants were more likely to have reflected on the relative timing of their extended training and schooling as compared to other life goals as compared to non-participants.

*“Before I joined AGE and I was told that I can’t become a soldier, I thought that then it’s not that all important to educate girls since they can’t become whatever they want. I changed the thoughts after I joined AGE.” –CHATS Participant*

#### **Lessons Learned**

There are a number of lessons learned from this assessment both in how to strengthen the program’s content, but also its delivery mechanism. The most significant differences between CHATS-only and scholar cohorts were centered around content and messaging emphasis, and how the two cohorts may be experiencing the program somewhat differently. This indicates differences in how the program is being implemented in the two different groups, pointing to the need to strengthen implementation fidelity and the delivery mechanism of CHATS at scale. However, the relatively similar results across groups, also positively suggest that the CHATS program has significant value to girls on its own, which helps build the case for scale. A number of changes in the program structure are already underway at the time of writing, but key lessons and changes are highlighted below.

**Group Facilitation as a Vehicle for Empowerment:** The most important lesson, perhaps, is a more nuanced understanding of the role that co-facilitation and peer-led programming can effectively play in programs designed to empower disadvantaged girls. On the one hand, the experience of group facilitation and being in charge was incredibly powerful for all participants of the program. On the other hand there was some clear indication from the quantitative evidence as well as from other stakeholders the peer-facilitation delivery of programmatic material was perhaps one of the reasons for girls’ lower levels of comprehension of more technical program content. This issue is one that will surely be challenging to resolve, but upon doing so will likely increase the benefits accrued to the program participants in very meaningful ways.

**SRH Content Delivery and the School Environment:** Another big lesson learned from this assessment is the challenge of delivering SRH content in a peer-led context. It was clear from the quantitative and

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<sup>7</sup> At the time of assessment entrepreneurship curricular content had not yet been delivered, so this assessment only measures knowledge acquisition in career pathways and higher education.

qualitative findings that some of the more nuanced and technical elements of the SRH content were not learned by participants, particularly because they were difficult for their peers to 'teach.' Another clear lesson is the challenge of SRH content in a school environment. Whereas the Ministry of Education has been incredibly supportive of the explicit SRH content included in CHATS, many schools still have policies that discourage and even punish discussion of these issues and certainly engagement in romantic relationships. The role of the Faculty Advisor as the primary implementer of CHATS, further complicates this perception by girls and perhaps limits the creation of true safe-space to engage in these issues. This is one of the reasons why, AGE Africa felt there was a disproportionate emphasis on abstaining from relationships as the only 'proper' way for girls to behave.

**Implementation Fidelity:** It became clear when comparing outcomes at particular school sites, that girls' knowledge acquisition, understanding of CHATS' program and purpose, and experience was heavily influenced by the environment of the school and the personalities of the implementing staff. In other words, the success of the implementation model is very person and personality driven. AGE Africa has re-designed and strengthened the delivery arm of CHATS to be much more structure dependent, and reliant on good systems and practice, rather than just on charismatic personalities. We believe that this is a necessary revision in the face of scale.

In the coming school year, AGE Africa plans to tackle all three of these issues with the introduction of a trained alumnae fellow as the primary implementer of CHATS. Alongside this new role, will be a targeted community engagement strategy the supports at community level, the gender learning and empowerment that CHATS participants undergo as part of the program.

This structure would simultaneously allow for more direct oversight of the program, would reduce staff costs, and enhance outcomes for girls in post-secondary transitions. It would also provide a less value-charged environment in which CHATS would take place and would allow for trained facilitators (alumnae fellows), to deliver the more difficult aspects of content.

This major shift will mark the launch of CHATS 2.0 this September and AGE Africa's continued partnership with the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology to bring the CHATS program to girls throughout Malawi.

## Conclusions

Although some changes to structure and delivery of CHATS will be needed to effectively run the program at scale, initial evidence suggests that this program is having a positive impact on girls' retention in school and leadership capacities. In contexts like Malawi with extremely high child marriage rates (50%) and extremely low levels of education for women, approaches to solving the challenges of girls' education must necessarily consider how to *empower* girls to be leaders in their own lives and communities. Without a very basic sense of agency, combined with the knowledge and skills to allow girls' to act on their futures, interventions to improve girls' educational outcomes will be limited at best. AGE Africa's CHATS program is uniquely focused on helping girls' develop these 'second generation' skills that are so critical to their futures.

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