Maria’s Turning Point!

For many youth in Malawi, attaining higher education is a dream that never comes true largely due to limited bed space at public universities and inability for the needy to pay fees.

Such was the case with Maria Kondowe, 28, from Lukhwawa village Traditional Authority (T/A) Mwasiska in the lakeshore district of Nkhatatabay.

Until six months ago, Maria had gone through all forms of academic disappointments and she had given up on ever achieving a meaningful life for herself.

Her story began to change for the better the moment she got selected to attend a Community Day Secondary School (CDSS). In Malawi, open day secondary schools are often limited in resources. They rarely have functional libraries and laboratories for science subjects. Also, many of the teachers have been upgraded from teaching in primary schools and often lack the content knowledge for more advanced courses.

It was not surprising therefore that Maria and many other students from Zolozolo CDSS could not make it to any of the country’s public universities. Further attempts to acquire tertiary qualifications only left her further disappointed. “I applied for nursing school and was left out. I tried teaching, I was not selected either. What really gutted me was when I applied to become a mere hospital attendant and was never picked,” she recalls.

Disappointed and bitter, Maria got married and went on to work in the maize field – all her dreams of becoming a nurse shuttered.
Today, Maria is no longer the distraught girl she once was. Everything about her speaks volumes of what a happy and confident young woman she has become. She is studying for a Certificate in Electrical Installation (CEI) with the Malawi Polytechnic to gain skills that will make her employable to become financially dependent.

This is thanks to the Strengthening Higher Education Access in Malawi Activity (SHEAMA) which has sponsored her to study the short course through Open Distance and e-Learning (ODE-L) at the public university.

SHEAMA, which is funded by United States Agency for International Development (USAID) seeks to increase the number of skilled and employable workforce by supporting ODL programs at public universities and providing scholarships to needy students especially adolescent girls and young women (AGYW) like Maria and vulnerable young men.

After studying online for three months, Maria and her other 104 CEI students [84 of whom are on a SHEAMA scholarship] were called to Poly for one week for hands on training to enhance their practical knowledge. She is now on internship at Prera Electrical to sharpen her skills. So far, she has been part of the team assigned to install electricity at a community day secondary school in Kasungu district.

Her supervisor, Mr. Patrick Msiska cannot believe Maria has been studying from home.

“All our interns have the background of face-to-face. This is our first time to interact with a student who has been studying on her own from home. Her understanding of issues and determination are outstanding. She can do circuit connection, wiring diagrams and connection of cooker control unit. We would love to see her in self-employment, creating jobs for other girls like her,” says Msiska.

Maria, probably the happiest apprentice in town, says she is ready to go out and make a difference for her family and community where she comes from.

“I never thought I would ever attain tertiary education. Just six months ago I was an ordinary farmer growing maize and vegetables; today I am an electrician. I can’t hide my joy,” says Maria, smiling.