

## Malawi by Johanna Duthie

When the letter arrived at school one morning, there was a sense of apprehension and nervousness in the classroom, I could hear everyone whispering wondering what my letter would reveal. I had been waiting for a whole week to find out if I had been lucky enough to be given a place. What if I did not get a place? What if my best friends all got to go and not me? I stared at the letter. I could not force myself to open it. Had I been chosen to go on the first trip to Malawi? This would be a once in a lifetime opportunity to visit a school in Africa. I prised the envelope open to reveal my letter. I was going to Malawi.

As we turned the corner of the uneven sandy 'road', I saw a sea of red. I recognised the red, it was the same tartan skirt I wore to school every day. Getting off the bus was a struggle with the number of girls surrounding us. Seeing so many girls wearing the same school uniform as I did was surreal. The kilts, unlike their other tattered clothing, appeared pristine; I could see the pride they had wearing these uniforms. Seeing the pride in the girls for having actual uniforms was ironic because back home we hate wearing itchy skirts and ties that strangle us. As I looked around, many girls were wearing only one shoe, torn at the sides, or non at all, others had t-shirts that were ripped.

All of a sudden I was overcome with emotion, I had a moment of realisation. In Edinburgh we have wardrobes filled with clothes we buy and never wear. If something is old, or damaged many people feel inclined to discard the item and yet there are people in the world who are not as fortunate as us wearing clothing we would label as unsatisfactory but they do not see a problem with it. Our idea of 'old' and 'ruined' is completely different to the girls I met. They would wear something until it physically cannot be worn anymore, because they appreciate anything they are given. The girls were so happy, even though they had so little.

"Smile," we would say, as we took a photo of the girls that night. They smiled at us when we first met them, they smiled when we saw them around school, they would even smile when they were in classes; however, when we took their photo - as requested by the Malawian girls - a smile would never appear on their faces. Once the photo was

taken they would run over to the person with the camera and stare at the photo of themselves for ages. It took me a while to understand why they were so interested in seeing photos of themselves. I worked it out on the second night when I was in bathroom. There wasn't one single mirror in the whole school. The girls have never seen what they look like. I was astounded to think that something so simple as looking at yourself in a mirror and knowing what you look like isn't even possible there. We see ourselves everyday, in the mirror, when brushing our teeth, doing our hair, or our make up. In our culture we have become obsessed with how we look, we couldn't live without mirrors, however these girls could not care less about how they look.

To us looks are all some people care about, however in Malawi education was the main thing a girl cared about. It was clear to me that education was a huge issue and that for a girl to receive proper secondary education was even greater – as boys are viewed in their society as the gender who should receive schooling. Whilst travelling around Malawi, I could see how underdeveloped the country was. People were not making as much money as they would do here in Britain. This made it clear as to why so many Malawians do not receive an education; they can only just afford the bare necessities, let alone attend a fee-paying school. Therefore in Malawi, due to the lack of wealth, more affluent people fund individuals who wish to be educated but cannot afford it: this gives these students opportunities to learn valuable life skills to improve their quality of life. By the end of my seven day visit, three schoolgirls' sponsorship had been cut off.

I witnessed girls going straight to the headmaster's office and bluntly being told that they were no longer attending the school and that they should pack their bags immediately. The guilt overwhelmed me, I could feel a lump in the back of my throat, as I realised the inequalities of the education systems around the world. On comparison, between a school in Britain and the school I visited in Malawi, it was like night and day. These girls who loved and longed to be educated were being deprived of the very thing that students where I live take for granted. The girls in Malawi view their education as I would view going on a five star holiday. The difference between us is astounding, and in my humble opinion, alarming to see that something so 'little' – such as education – is seen to these girls as the most amazing opportunity.

As a 'whole school' project in Scotland, we all donated one-pencil case, which were then taken with the group to Malawi to be given to the girls. I still remember the exact look on the girls' faces as they were each handed a pencil case that included all kinds of stationary: pens, pencils, rubbers, rulers, sticky notes, highlighters and many more items that the girls never even imagined existed. My heart sank as I saw the girls' faces light up as bright as the sun, because for the first time in their lives, they had their own pen to write their school work with. Beforehand, they were passing and sharing pens round the classroom to do classwork. Now, every girl was equipped with all the implements that they could ever need in the classroom.

On reflection of this trip as a whole, the well known saying 'give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a life time' immediately springs to mind. I can now see that there would have been no point in us bringing pens to Malawi if there were no teachers to teach the girls how to use them in an educational way. The better and more in depth education that can be provided for the girls at the school will undoubtedly improve the quality of life, not only these girls, but also the children of the future. From visiting the school, I was exposed to a prime example of giving development aid rather than emergency aid. Rather than just giving them money (many people believe this is the best form of donation to help) that they are unsure how to use to their advantage, we should be providing them with 'resources', which will help with their education and thereby improve their quality of life in the longer term. By sponsoring a girl at the school they were being given the opportunity to learn, and live a normal life.

When I prise open my exam results in August I will think about the girls in Malawi who I met, who won't receive the high standard of education we receive, who are less fortunate than I am, who won't be opening exam results in August. It will remind me that I have future plans to help change what I can in the world. The education I receive I will use to help others.