How a Canadian-led legal team is fighting to protect the girls of Malawi from age-old sexual myths that too often ruin their lives.

Words and photography by Jacqui Labatt

S
mall, beautiful and peaceful, Malawi calls itself the “warm heart” of Africa. But it also ranks as the world’s 10th poorest nation, has one of its highest incidences of HIV/AIDS, and clings to some troubling traditions — such as a dark and preda-


tory attitude toward virginity. “Men hunt for young girls to rape, in the belief that having sex with a virgin will make them rich,” explains Toronto lawyer Fiona Sampson.

Incredibly, some even “harvest” a young girl’s breasts and uteruses to sell as “charms” on the black market, a practice documented in a 2007 United Nations report, which declared that “trafficking in body parts and child abductions are relatively common in the region,” whereas attempts to stop them “are virtually non-


equivocal.”

Ms. Sampson is the founder of The Equality Effect, a non-profit that battles sexual violence and sex discrimination. “We want to see a day when Malawians — men and women alike — are free to live their lives without fear of assault, and certainly without fear of rape,” she says.

Until 30 years ago, a rape conviction in Canada required the testimony of a witness — as is still the case in Malawi, whose legal sys-


tem is rooted in British common law. A frequent problem for the few cases that do get to court is the fact that proceedings are con-


ducted in English, often bewildering for rural dwellers able to understand only Chichewa, the coun-


ty’s other official language. “A change in outcome for girl rape victims, and accountability for police and perpetrators — that’s what we want to see,” Ms. Sampson explains. “Then we will know that the system works.”

Fiona Sampson, Toronto lawyer

The victim: Age 13

The suspect: A local man seven years her senior

The attack: Lured from home by the victim’s stepfather, as she was returning from the local market, a practice documented in a 2007 United Nations report.

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Jacqui Labatt is a Toronto-based photojournalist.