

## **Grace Mkandawire's Journey to Financial Independence**

Grace Mkandawire, a resilient 43-year-old mother of five from Kayamba village, Traditional Authority Mwaluweni in Rumphu District, has transformed her life from desperation to success.

Living in a constant struggle to provide for her children's basic needs, Grace found hope through the Inclusive Rural Finance and Sustainable Livelihood Project, a transformative initiative by Opportunity International Malawi (OIM) with funding from Financial Access for Rural Markets, Smallholders and Enterprises Program (FARMSE).

In 2020, facing the depths of her misfortunes, Grace embraced the opportunity presented by the project. The initiative aimed to empower village banks with financial literacy and teach Community-Based Financial Organizations (CBFOs) technical skills, such as soap making.

Grace, recognizing this as her lifeline, joined a village bank, determined to break free from the shackles of her poverty.

"I believed this to be my only way out of my situation," Grace reflects.

Guided by the project's teachings on savings, share accumulation, and sustainable practices, Grace faced initial difficulties in securing funds for her weekly shares. However, undeterred by the hurdles, she courageously borrowed K60,000 from her village bank.

"I stood still and gathered some courage to borrow," she recalls.

With the loan, Grace purchased two piglets and ventured into selling usipa, aiming to generate daily income and contribute to her village banking shares. As the pigs multiplied, so did her entrepreneurial success. By the end of 2021, she had sold two pigs, enabling her to invest in her son's education, agricultural inputs, and other essential needs.

In 2022, Grace achieved a milestone by harvesting thirty bags of maize. Overwhelmed by the success, she continued to improve her village bank savings, maintaining her usipa business and contemplating new ventures. Selling five bags of maize, she diversified into selling plastic plates, pails, and basins, further expanding her financial portfolio.

"Feeding my family and paying school fees are no longer challenges," Grace proudly shares.

As her businesses flourished, she acquired goats through smart investments and efficient financial management. In November 2023, Grace received K120,000 from her village bank savings, allowing her to secure agricultural inputs and labor for the upcoming season. With a self-sufficient family, education is no longer a financial burden, and Grace remains determined to achieve even more.

Expressing her gratitude, Grace acknowledges Farmse and Opportunity International for their life-changing intervention.

"Their support has been a turning point in my life," she states.

Opportunity International Community Facilitator, Alex Kkamwendo, emphasizes the profound impact of the project, stating, "the project has greatly improved the lives of beneficiaries, enabling them to meet daily needs, including food and education—their once insurmountable challenges."

Grace Mkandawire's story is a testament to the transformative power of strategic interventions, determination, and financial literacy—a journey from vulnerability to triumph.