



Para Sport Against Stigma 2.0

# Impact Story:

## Amplifying Para Athlete Voices Through Radio Drama

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Delivered by



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In the lead up to the Paris 2024 Paralympic Games six episodes of the popular Malawian radio drama series, Zimachitika (These Things Happen) were broadcast as a creative way of building interest in Para sport.

In Malawi, radio remains a cornerstone of communication, with a listenership rate of 71.2% of the national population . This makes it the most consumed and trusted source of information in the country. With 76 licensed radio stations, ranging from national to community levels, radio has the unparalleled ability to reach diverse audiences.

For 28 years, programs like Zimachitika, produced by Story Workshop Educational Trust (SWET), have leveraged this reach to address pressing social issues, including discrimination against people with disabilities. By weaving authentic narratives into its storytelling, the drama not only entertains but also educates and challenges societal biases, a strategy known as 'edutainment'.

The first draft of the radio drama scripts were informed by research generated as part of the Para Sport Against Stigma project. Then in June 2024, a script review workshop was held in Blantyre to ensure that the Zimachitika episodes accurately reflected the experiences of people with disabilities. The episodes followed the story of Limbika, a school girl who was abandoned at birth by her parents due to the stigma surrounding her disability. She was raised by her caring but overprotective grandmother. Limbika becomes involved in Para sport and the wider community with her friend, Sinte.

**Gladys Chiwinja**, a Malawian Para-athlete specializing in sitting volleyball and shot put, and **Innocent Katsache**, a scriptwriter at Story Workshop Educational Trust (SWET), sat down to discuss how this process contributed to challenging discrimination. Their conversation highlighted the transformative power of storytelling in changing perceptions and promoting inclusivity.

**Innocent:** I wanted us to start with how we began, like my journey as a radio drama script writer started in 2017. In 2016, I was writing for television. The person who used to write for radio left Story Workshop to pursue further studies, which created a gap. Then people would say, "Since you write for TV, why don't you also write for radio?" That's how I started writing for Zimachitika, a drama series that had been around for a long time. I used to listen to it as a child. When writing, we follow a structure, each character plays a specific role. Most of the time, as a writer, you sit in the office, thinking, "How should I structure this story? What message should I convey?" But how did you get into sports? How did your journey begin?

**Gladys:** Uh, as for me, my journey began in 2014, when I was still in primary school. I used to participate in different activities, mostly sports-related, competing in running and other athletic games with my peers. That's when the teachers saw me, they were the ones who noticed our abilities, and we also had special needs teachers who would assess us. Then in 2014, we learned that there was a need for para athletes, as the Malawi Paralympic team was being

formed. They announced that they were looking for people with disabilities to take part in international competitions. Just like how our able-bodied counterparts competed in regional games for netball, football, and basketball, which took place every two years. They started scouting for children with disabilities in schools, and that's how I got recognised and given the opportunity to join the games. I was selected to participate in the competitions, and I travelled to Zimbabwe to compete.

**Innocent:** Okay, so when your parents or those close to you heard that Para sports had come and that you wanted to be part of it, how did they react?

**Gladys:** Eh! for my parents, it was something very precious. They never expected it. They just thought that people like us would always be left out. And to them, this was something truly valuable because they never imagined that I, as a person with a disability, would ever set foot abroad. In my family, who was the first person to travel outside the country? It was me. Even the people around my home were surprised. They may have just assumed that I wouldn't be able to do anything in life, but when they saw me travelling abroad, they started respecting me. I became a little star! (both laugh)

**Innocent:** I'd like us to go back to the workshop that took place in June 2024. As a scriptwriter, I usually sit in the office and imagine scenarios that convey a message. So, we had already written the scripts and were about to record when Professor Magalasi, Dr Jessica Noske-Turner and Jennie Wong from the UK, and the Malawi Paralympic Committee Malawi President, Mr. Chiutsi joined us for script approvals. That's when we asked ourselves: Before recording, 'why don't we sit down with actual Para athletes and people with disabilities?' We needed to understand how they felt about these stories, whether the language used was appropriate and if it truly reflected reality. At times, I felt confident, but at other times, I thought, 'Oh no, we might have missed a few things' (chuckles). Some of the feedback might even make us start over. But for you, what were your expectations?

**Gladys:** I thought it was an excellent idea. It meant that the message would spread far and wide, reaching people who might not normally engage with disability issues.

**Innocent:** Uh, you thought it was a wise idea to use drama?

**Gladys:** Drama, yes, many people love dramas, even if they don't like sports. Some learn better through storytelling. So, for me, using radio drama was a brilliant way to educate society.

**Innocent:** As we reviewed the scripts, was there a particular story or character that impacted you the most? Maybe someone like Gonje, Limbika, Sinte, or Chithope?

**Gadys:** Limbika's story really touched me. She was locked in the house, treated as if she was incapable simply because of her disability. People would say things like, 'You can't see, how can you run?' That hit me hard because it reflects real life. Some parents speak to their children with disabilities as if they don't have dreams, as if they are invisible. But the play gave a voice to

those who can't stand up for themselves. It made me think, how many children like Limbika exist in our communities, silenced and hidden away?

**Innocent:** That's powerful. And personally, what did you take away from the play?

**Gladys:** It reminded me that having a disability does not mean you are incapable. Whether it's a child or an adult, they can still go to school, meet their peers, get an education, and live a full life. Sadly, many children with disabilities are discouraged from leaving home. They're told, 'Stay inside, people will mock you.' But the play showed the harm of such attitudes; it encouraged parents to see their children's potential instead of their limitations.

**Innocent:** I remember in script three, there was a scene where Limbika was hiding behind the toilet. She had been insulted because of her albinism. Her teacher used that moment to educate others about albinism, explaining how it happens. You mentioned that this scene taught you something. Could you expand on that?

**Gladys:** When people see a person with albinism, they often think something went wrong during their creation, as if God made an error. They fail to see us as just another human being. Instead, they resort to offensive remarks, forgetting that a person with albinism is born just like any other child. A person with dark skin can give birth to a child with albinism because it is determined by genetics—some genes carry albinism traits, while others do not. People who lack this understanding often speak ignorantly, making insensitive comments. Sometimes, when passing by a group of women, I would hear children mocking me, calling me names like 'Napwele' (a derogatory term). Instead of correcting them, the women would laugh or add their own remarks, forgetting that they too could have a child with albinism one day. This play helped me realize that ignorance fuels discrimination. When people lack knowledge, they dehumanize others. But when they learn—really learn—their mindset starts to shift.

**Innocent:** Aha! That's a really great point! I must also say the workshop was a great experience, to have live feedback on how the target audience would actually react. It was amazing to watch the producer from MBC, though I can't quite recall his name....

**Gladys:** The gentleman who is blind

**Innocent:** Yes, [Andrew Mtegha,] the gentleman who is blind, observing how he was following the happenings, as we were reading through, he laughed, not a mere laugh, but a laugh that showed he was grasping something and enjoying it... [Gladys:he was really having a good time] He even encouraged us to be more explicit and not to hold back. He said we should not beat around the bush. I remember prior to the workshop, there was a debate about whether we should be explicit with some discriminatory terms in the script. Some felt it was necessary to reflect reality, while others worried it might reinforce negative stereotypes. Which side are you on?

**Gladys:** Speak the truth openly. If we hide things, people won't understand. If we don't talk about it, how can we ever solve it? We must name the problem so we can end it.

**Innocent:** Uhm, some people argue that dramas representing people with disabilities should be written by individuals with disabilities because they can best share their lived experiences through the stories. They fear that able-bodied people may not be able to do justice in accurately portraying the real experiences of people with disabilities. What are your thoughts on this matter?

**Gladys:** Mmh! My opinion is that an able-bodied person can tell the story of a disabled person, and a disabled person can also tell the story of an able-bodied person. An able-bodied person may understand things that a disabled person doesn't, and vice versa. So, it is not true that only disabled people should write their own stories.

**Innocent:** Ah! ah, many times we see that media coverage only talks about people with disabilities without actually capturing their voices and telling their story from their perspective. Do you think the Zimachitka drama approached it in any different way?

**Gladys:** Yes, there's a big difference. Some people create stories about us without ever speaking to us. They make assumptions instead of listening. But with Zimachitika, we were part of the process. Our voices were heard, our perspectives were included. That's the change I want to see in all storytelling, representation that's real, not just symbolic.

**Innocent:** What message would you like to share with the people behind Zimachitika people like me, the professors at the University of Malawi and Loughborough University, and the leadership at Paralympics Malawi?

**Gladys:** My message is this: Thank you. What you started must continue. Too often, the voices of people with disabilities are silenced. Before this, no one thought to create a drama about sports and albinism. No one considered how storytelling could highlight our struggles and our strengths. This play is changing that. It is making people realize their own biases, question their assumptions, and most importantly, change. So, my final message is this: Keep going. Keep telling these stories. And keep including the voices of those who have lived them.

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## Collaborating organizations:

StoryWorkshop Malawi

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[www.lborolondon.ac.uk/research-innovation/para-sport-against-stigma](http://www.lborolondon.ac.uk/research-innovation/para-sport-against-stigma)

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