



Para Sport Against Stigma 2.0

Impact Story:

When Sport Opens a Door: *Reflections on disability, stigma and Para sport in Malawi*

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Impact Story: When Sport Opens a Door - Reflections on disability, stigma and Para sport in Malawi

Stories about disability and sport are often told through moments of success or celebration. This conversation between Timveni Radio and TV journalist Mphatso Mnelemba and sitting volleyball player and fashion designer Callista Mdumuka offers something different. Through reflections on school, gender, disability, sport, stigma and everyday life, the discussion reveals both the hope and uncertainty that can shape participation in para sport in Malawi. It is also a conversation that highlights the role journalists and storytellers can play in creating space for experiences and voices that are often overlooked.



Image 1: Mphatso Mnelemba, Timveni Radio and TV journalist (Left) and sitting volleyball player and fashion designer, Callista Mdumuka (right).

Mphatso: Before we begin our discussion, let me first introduce myself so that people can understand who I am and how I came to be part of this conversation. My name is Mphatso Mnelemba and I work for Timveni Radio and TV as a sports reporter and correspondent for Thyolo and Mulanje.

Before joining Timveni, I studied for an Advanced Diploma in Journalism and Media Studies at MUBAS, formerly The Polytechnic, from 2020 to 2022. While at college, I did my internship with Gaka FM, a radio station based in Nsanje that also operated under The Polytechnic.

After completing my studies, the school later sent me to MIJ FM Mzuzu Bureau. However, because I was deeply passionate about sports, I spent most of my time around football matches and sporting activities. One day at Kamuzu Stadium, Innocent Chitimbe, a football commentator and Head of News at Timveni, noticed me during a match and asked me to work as his analyst for the day.

After the game, he encouraged me to apply for a position at Timveni. I wrote the application letter and after some time I received a call inviting me for interviews. Following the interviews, I was informed that I had been hired not only as a sports reporter but also as a correspondent covering Thyolo and Mulanje districts. That is how my journey with Timveni Radio and TV began.

Today, I am joined by someone whose story is both inspiring and powerful. Many people may want to know more about her. Who exactly is Callista?

Callista: Callista is a young woman who was born with a disability without legs, but by God's grace I am able to walk properly and also play sitting volleyball with my friends.

Mphatso: So who exactly is Callista? Where did you go to school and what is your family background?

Callista: My name is Callista Mdumuka. I did my primary education at Ndirande Kachele Primary School from Standard 1 to Standard 8. For secondary school, I did Forms 1 to 3 at Mwanza Secondary School and completed Form 4 at Henry Henderson School of Excellence. I am the fourth born in my family.

Mphatso: You said you are a sitting volleyball player. How did you become involved in the sport?

Callista: I started playing sitting volleyball in 2018 while I was still in primary school. I used to play ball games with my friends. One day, a lady called Mercy and her colleagues came to our school looking for people with disabilities to join sitting volleyball. I was the only girl with a disability at the school at the time, while the others were boys, so they selected me.

Mphatso: How did your parents react after meeting Mercy?

Callista: When Mercy and her friends visited our home, my mother became very excited because she never expected that her daughter with a disability could be selected to play sports. Mercy came to our school after classes had ended. They called me back to school and explained everything about sitting volleyball and how they wanted people with disabilities to join. They later met the headteacher, who gave them permission to take us for training. After that, Mercy and her friends would come regularly to teach us how to play until I understood the game. When I reached home, I explained to my parents that there was a sports programme looking for people like me to play volleyball. My mother was very happy and excited about the opportunity. She told Mercy that she was free to come and get me whenever needed.

Mphatso: Growing up with a disability can be difficult. How was life for you as a child?

Callista: When I was born, my parents were not happy because people mocked them. Most of the time I stayed indoors or behind my mother. When I started walking on my own, children used to laugh at me and call me names, but I left everything in God's hands.

Mphatso: How did people at school and home treat you as you were growing up?

Callista: I did not have many female friends because I used a wheelchair. Most of my friends were boys because they used to help me move to and from school. I only had one close female friend.

Mphatso: You mentioned that you used a wheelchair at first. What made you stop using it?

Callista: I was able to walk, but my school was far from home, so I used a wheelchair. Later, when I was at Henry Henderson School of Excellence in Form 3, some girls used to push me around in the wheelchair. One day, they complained that I had become too heavy for them. Their words hurt me deeply because I felt like a burden. From that day, I stopped using the wheelchair and started walking on my own.

Mphatso: Have you ever experienced situations where people looked down on you because of your disability?

Callista: Yes. The incident with the wheelchair affected me greatly. Whenever people speak negatively about my condition, I simply ignore them and move on.

Mphatso: How do you deal with stress?

Callista: When I am stressed, I look for a peaceful place where I can be alone. I meditate, listen to music and sleep instead of overthinking because too much stress can make me sick.

Mphatso: Apart from journalism, I am also involved in sports myself. I play netball, and every morning I usually go for roadwork or a walk before taking a bath and attending morning mass. Later in the day, I go for training sessions, aerobics or gym workouts. Sometimes when going back home, I deliberately choose longer routes just to stretch my body and keep active. So I would like to know, what does your daily routine look like from morning until the end of the day?

Callista: Every morning I pray, do some exercises at home, take a bath and go to class. After classes, I go for training with my friends before returning home.

Mphatso: How about when you are at home?

Callista: When I am home, I still pray and exercise, but I am usually very busy and rarely have time for training.

Mphatso: Let us talk more about your journey in sitting volleyball. How is the sport currently?

Callista: To be honest, my sitting volleyball career has stopped because it has been a long time since I last played. Many people are no longer participating.

Mphatso: Tell us more about the early days of training after your parents allowed you to join.

Callista: Mercy and her friends used to come to our school every Friday for training sessions. With time, I learned the basics and developed new skills.

Mphatso: How was the experience of meeting new teammates and making friends through sports?

Callista: At first I felt like I could not manage, but with time I got used to it. They welcomed me warmly and we encouraged one another.

Mphatso: Did you ever compete in tournaments?

Callista: Unfortunately, we never competed in any major competition. We were always told that competitions would come, but since 2021 we have barely met properly. The last time we met was on 28 December [Malawi Para Games] last year.

Mphatso: You may not have competed yet, but I believe you watch international competitions. How does that motivate you and how do you see your future in sitting volleyball?

Callista: Whenever I watch competitions on television, I become encouraged because I see people with more serious disabilities than mine performing at high levels. It gives me hope that one day I can also succeed.

Mphatso: How would you describe the state of para sports in Malawi?

Callista: Honestly, it is not what I expected. We train without proper jerseys and there are very few indoor facilities, so most of the time we train under the hot sun. Many Para athletes are not sponsored either in sports or education. There are very few sponsors supporting para sports, which makes it difficult to build a career.

Mphatso: What changes would you like to see?

Callista: I would love to see authorities provide proper uniforms and better facilities for us. Sponsors should also support Para athletes the same way they support football and other sports so that our lives can improve and para sports can grow in Malawi.

Mphatso: Despite the challenges, how has Malawi Paralympic Committee as an organisation helped you both as an athlete and as a person?

Callista: In the beginning, things were much better. Trainings were organised properly and athletes from different districts and regions came together. That encouraged me because I met many people who shared the same passion.

Mphatso: How has MPC as an organization impacted your personal life?

Callista: Through activities organised by the Malawi Paralympic Committee, I managed to buy some personal items. There was also a time during a para commemoration event when we marched from Kamuzu Stadium to Blantyre Sports Arena. A television station captured me during the live broadcast, and someone who watched the programme later approached me and offered me a scholarship to study at Henry Henderson School of Excellence. Without para sports, I would never have received that opportunity.

Mphatso: That must have been exciting.

Callista: It really was. It felt unbelievable.

Mphatso: How did your parents react to the scholarship opportunity?

Callista: They were very excited because it was my first chance to experience life at a boarding secondary school.



Image 2: Callista's interview on Mibawa TV in 2023, which eventually led to a scholarship at Henry Henderson School of Excellence.

Mphatso: We recently attended a [Sports Journalists] workshop in Blantyre [with people from different countries and professions. Personally, I learned a lot about the correct terms to use when covering para sports stories, networking and understanding the experiences of Para athletes. I

also met people like you and Gladys, who became close friends and sisters to me. What did you learn from that workshop?

Callista: I really enjoyed the workshop because people openly discussed the challenges we face in our daily lives. Meeting others encouraged me a lot. The international visitors were also very friendly and supportive. I would love to see more workshops like that because they help us interact, speak out and learn from one another.

Mphatso: Finally, is there anything you would like to say?

Callista: I would really appreciate an opportunity or scholarship to study at a proper university for at least two years. I cannot rely only on fashion designing. If opportunities arise, I would appreciate support from people willing to sponsor my education.

Mphatso: Thank you so much, Callista, for sharing your story so openly. Your journey is inspiring and your determination is admirable. We hope your story encourages society to support and uplift people living with disabilities, especially those involved in para sports. We also hope that your dreams in education, fashion designing and sports continue to grow.

Conversations like this remain important in encouraging society to recognise, support and empower people living with disabilities. It is through such stories that awareness is raised and meaningful change can begin.

Acknowledgments:

Mphatso Mnelemba
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www.lborolondon.ac.uk/research-innovation/para-sport-against-stigma

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