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Zimbabwe makes it illegal for schools to expel pregnant girls

Women's rights campaigners say new law will help ensure girls have equal rights to an education.

By Farai Shawn Matiashe

Thomson Reuters Foundation (25.08.2020) - <https://tmsnrt.rs/3hNgYhN> - Zimbabwe has made it illegal for schools to expel pupils who get pregnant, a measure women's rights campaigners said would help tackle gender inequality in the classroom and stop many girls from dropping out of school.

A legal amendment announced last week seeks to reinforce a 1999 guideline that was patchily implemented, and comes as school closures due to coronavirus raise fears of a rise in sexual abuse and unwanted pregnancies.

Many parents of pregnant girls, or the girls themselves, decide to quit schooling due to the pregnancy, and schools do not always do enough to encourage them to stay, officials say.

"I'm expecting every parent and guardian and everyone else to understand that every child must be assisted by all of us to go to school," Cain Mathema, the education minister in charge of schools, told the Thomson Reuters Foundation on Monday.

"Every child whether boy or girl... has a right to go to school in Zimbabwe," he said.

In 2018, 12.5% of the country's roughly 57,500 school dropouts stopped attending classes due to pregnancy or marriage reasons - almost all of them girls, according to Education Ministry statistics.

Priscilla Misihairwabwi-Mushonga, an opposition lawmaker who chairs a parliamentary education committee, said making the previous guidelines into a law with possible sanctions would make the rules more effective and address gender disparities.

"In circumstances where the pregnancy was a result of kids of the same age, the boy would not be necessarily expelled from school," she said.

"It was also a double tragedy for the girl... as in most circumstances, it was not a consensual sex but some sort of abuse by some predator older than her. So, she has been traumatised and raped then she is further traumatised by being kicked out of school."

Nyaradzo Mashayamombe, founding director of advocacy group Tag a Life International and leader of a consortium of organizations that pushed for the law, said she feared lockdown measures may have caused a spike in unwanted teen pregnancies.

"We are in a dangerous time where children have been out of school for a long time. Most of them are not even attending radio and television lessons," she said, calling for the government to ensure the new law is enforced.

Pregnancy is just one of the reasons that girls in Zimbabwe could fail to return to classes after coronavirus restrictions are lifted, said Sibusisiwe Ndlovu, communications specialist at Plan International Zimbabwe.

Poverty and early marriage will also stop some from resuming their studies, she said, welcoming the new legislation as a step in the right direction.

"This amendment is crucial in fulfilling the access to education right for all children – especially girls," Ndlovu said.

However, campaigners in the southern African country say girls will still need extra support to continue with their studies even if they keep attending classes while pregnant.

"Social support and financial resources are required for girls to fully utilise this window of opportunity," said Faith Nkala, national director of education nonprofit CAMFED Zimbabwe.

"Especially girls from marginalised families, who will need the additional support to remain in school, and to come back after giving birth."

Ending child marriages - layering approach the way to go

By Paidamoyo Chipunza

All Africa (24.04.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2DuyxBi> - A myriad of factors have been associated with child marriages in Zimbabwe, key among them being religious and cultural beliefs, poverty, lack of serious sex education in schools and inadequate knowledge on children's rights and other legal systems that support them.

Child marriage in itself has been identified as one of the impediments to girls' emancipation, a situation that limits their potential to excel in life.

In fact, research and statistics have shown that child marriages force girls to drop off school, increase their chances of acquiring HIV and AIDS, increase their chances of experiencing complications while giving birth and reduce their chances of gaining financial independence among other consequences, thus it is of paramount importance for the country to end this social ill.

Latest statistics from the United Nations Children's Fund reveal that 32 percent of girls in Zimbabwe are married before the age of 18 and four percent are married before their 15th birthday.

This is despite the fact that Zimbabwe has criminalised all marriages below the age of 18 (the 2016 Constitutional Court ruling).

The statistics further reveal that prevalence of child marriages is highest in Mashonaland Central, where 50 percent of children are married off before they reach the age of 18, followed by Mashonaland West whose figures stand at 42 percent, Masvingo 39 percent, Mashonaland East 36 percent, Midlands 31 percent, Manicaland 30 percent, Matabeleland North 27 percent, Harare 19 percent, Matabeleland South 18 percent and Bulawayo 10 percent.

Encounters with some children who were forced to marry early or who married early revealed that a number of factors contributed to their decision-making.

Isabel Munhenzva (not her real name), who has a moderate down syndrome disease is one such victim.

Her father works as a gardener in Harare where he earns RTGS\$200.

Her mother, who is a staunch believer of one of the apostolic sects, spends most of her time at church and has no source of income to complement her fathers' earnings.

Isabel's parents have three other minor children who live with their grandmother in rural Gutu.

Because of her condition, coupled with financial incapacitation and lack of knowledge on where to seek assistance, Isabel did not complete her primary education.

She dropped off school before completing her primary level education, after which she was impregnated at the age of 14 years.

"We would have wanted her to get married.

"If the person who impregnated her had agreed, it would have assisted us in a big way," said Isabel's father.

"What we now want is for the man to help us look after his son (Isabel's baby) through a maintenance fee," he added, without even realising that he was contributing to violation of his girl child's right to justice.

Asked if he made a police report against the perpetrator, Isabel's father insisted on getting a maintenance fee.

"I am not interested in getting him arrested because it does not give me anything," he said. "

"All I want is for him to pay a maintenance fee, and that is the route I am pursuing."

For Isabel's father, it is the monetary aspect that matters, maybe because of his poor financial background.

However, this case reveals even more complex issues associated with child marriages i.e her parents' level of ignorance on children's rights and implications of their violations,

something that can be attributed to their own level of knowledge of these and other associated issues.

Isabel failed to complete primary education as she was impregnated -- possibly without her consent and her perpetrator was never brought to book -- possibly it was a relative or a close family friend whom the parents do not want to strain their relations with.

This case also presents a typical patriarchal society often associated with African traditions, that leave all decisions making to man.

For some reasons, Isabel's mother doesn't seem to have spoken against his husband's decision, possibly her religion also contributed to her reserved-kind-of-approach to the whole issue.

Throughout the conversation, her father keeps stamping his authority over his daughter in singular, not in plural as a family decision.

In as much as fathers usually have the final say in a family, empowered mothers are usually known of going out of their way in serving the interests of their daughters.

Maybe, Isabel's mother is one such woman requiring empowerment to enable her to realise what is good and what is bad for the future of both her daughter and her grandson.

Thus ending child, early and forced marriages requires concerted efforts from multiple stakeholders as Panos Institute Southern Africa put it across in their media brief on ending child marriages in Zimbabwe: Child marriage is a multi-faceted phenomenon that requires involvement of the physical, social, cultural and legal support from different stakeholders.

It needs a multi-sectoral approach in order to win the fight.

Zimbabwe is one of the 10 countries in Africa implementing the United States' President's Emergency Plan for Aids Relief (PEPFAR)'s DREAMS (Determined, Resilient, Empowered, AIDS-free, Mentored, Safe women) project, aimed at addressing exactly that challenge of fragmented approaches to solving challenges.

A recent research published in PloS One Journal titled: The DREAMS core package of interventions: A comprehensive approach to preventing HIV among adolescent girls and women noted that although individual interventions have shown promise, no single intervention has emerged that can avert the majority of new HIV infections, hence introduction of PEPFAR's "layering approach".

Authors of this journal attribute their conclusion to complex constellation of factors that place girls and young women at risk of contracting HIV.

"This underscores the need to develop comprehensive packages of social, economic and biomedical interventions to both reduce girls' vulnerability to HIV and increase their agency," wrote the authors.

Similarly, no single intervention can avert child, early and forced marriages.

In fact, there is need for a coordinated approach, offered as a whole package to intended beneficiaries for it to make meaningful impact.

Layering simply means providing multiple, but coordinated interventions to selected beneficiaries for maximum impact.

In the case of Isabel above, with the layering approach, she and her family could be beneficiaries of interventions that empower them to reduce their level of both poverty and knowledge, as well as assisting them with legal advice to seek justice.

The idea behind this layering of services is to ensure that there is no duplication of services and that there is effective impact on assistance rendered.

The Government of Zimbabwe has already acknowledged the success of this initiative and at some point showed commitment to replicating it across the country.

At the moment, the model is being used in selected districts funded by PEPFAR.

Should it be replicated nationally, it may go a long way in ending child marriages in Zimbabwe.

Zimbabwe is one of the countries that committed to ending child marriages by the end of 2020, which is just next year, under the Ministerial Commitment on comprehensive sexuality education and sexual and reproductive health services for adolescents and young people in Eastern and Southern Africa.

The country has also signed and ratified some regional and international instruments against child marriages, which include, but not limited to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.

Towards the end of last year, a plan of action to end child marriages was also developed.

With such extraordinary commitment, the nation and the world await to see a reduction of the 32 percent of girls in Zimbabwe who are being married before they reach 18 years.

UN Women, chiefs join hands to end child marriages

By Delphine Serumaga

The Herald (20.02.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2FjHn5E> - Zimbabwe is among countries with the highest prevalence of child marriages in Africa. Approximately one in three girls are married off before the age of 18.

According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, forced and early marriage denies children their right to protection from harmful practices, abuse and exploitation, and takes away their right to develop to their fullest.

As one of the responses to the problem of child marriages, UN Women in Zimbabwe and the Chiefs' Council of Zimbabwe have formed a partnership to accelerate the end of child marriage in the country.

The partnership, agreed to in January 2019, resulted in the participation of three members of the Chiefs' Council, led by their president, Chief Fortune Charumbira, in high level meetings on "Transforming Traditions, Norms, Customs and Cultures to End Child Marriage and Female Genital Mutilation in Africa: Joining Hands with Traditional and Cultural Leaders" held on February 10-11, 2019 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Hopefully, the work by UN Women and the Chiefs' Council in Zimbabwe will strengthen capacity of chiefs to influence legislative reform on child marriage and to tackle the issue in the communities within their jurisdiction.

The Addis Ababa meeting convened by UN Women was held in collaboration with the Government of the Republic of Zambia and the African Union Commission. The meeting brought together traditional and cultural leaders from over 15 African countries.

Others from Zimbabwe who attended are Chief Siansali from Binga, who is also the Provincial Chairperson of the Chiefs Provincial Assembly in Matabeleland North and Commissioner Chief Chikwizo from the Zimbabwe Gender Commission.

The meeting provided a platform for the renewal of commitments to end child marriage and female-genital mutilation in Africa.

On the side event of the AU Heads of State Summit, the meeting also sought to secure and renew commitments of Heads of State and Government and Traditional and Cultural Leaders to incorporate transformational approaches that effectively address socio-cultural barriers to end child marriage and female-genital mutilation in Africa by 2030.

The Council of Traditional Leaders of Africa (COTLA) was launched at the event in Addis Ababa. COTLA is a Pan-African platform of male and female traditional and cultural leaders, primarily set up to amplify and organise their voices and actions across Africa to transform culture and eliminate negative cultural practices that harm women and girls.

In their final communiqué, traditional leaders acknowledged the importance of the platform in enabling them to bring together their collective voices, influence, authority and action to redefining the leadership role of traditional leaders in the urgent efforts to fight child marriage and female-genital mutilation, which practices have no place in our societies.

Speaking in one of the dialogue sessions, Chief Charumbira expressed concern over criminals who hide behind cultural practices and perform gross human rights violations under the guise of culture.

He added that perpetrators must be brought to book and prosecuted and pledged the support of the Chiefs from Zimbabwe to the regional initiative to end child marriage and female-genital mutilation.

Going forward, the partnership in Zimbabwe will strengthen coordinated efforts to end child marriages at local, national and regional level.

Zimbabwe women urged to report rape by soldiers

BBC (29.01.2019) - <https://bbc.in/2Ba5n9s> - Women allegedly raped by the security forces during night raids to suppress recent protests have been urged to report their cases to the police.

The information minister said only one attack has been officially reported despite numerous allegations, the state-run Herald newspaper reports.

The BBC has spoken to six women who said they were raped by soldiers.

Correspondents say there is widespread mistrust of the police, who were also involved in the crackdown on protests.

The state-funded Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission has accused soldiers of using "systematic torture" in the crackdown on protests that broke out a fortnight ago following a more than doubling in fuel prices. It has strongly criticised the authorities for using troops to quell demonstrations.

The BBC spoke to six women who had sought refuge at a safe house about their experiences during the night-time door-to-door raids by the security forces.

One of the women said: "They slapped me, then said they want to have sex with me.

When I refused, they slapped me again. The first soldier had unprotected sex with me. Then the other one said, 'I want to do the same.'"

Information Minister Monica Mutsvangwa said the government did not condone and or tolerate "criminal behaviour by any member of society particularly those in positions of trust".

"All women, who were allegedly raped, are encouraged to come forward and report the cases to the Zimbabwe Republic Police Victim Friendly Unit, which can be found at every police station around the country," The Herald quotes her as saying in a statement.

"The unit is led by a female commissioner, hence, all affected women will be treated with empathy, compassion, respect and due care. Their safety will be guaranteed," she added.

Angry lawyers

Police say more than 1,000 people, including some children, have been arrested in the crackdown.

The BBC's Shingai Nyoka in Harare says hundreds of lawyers protested on Tuesday in the capital, Harare, against the mass arrests and torture of alleged protesters in detention.

They accused some judges and magistrates of being complicit in human rights violations by fast-tracking of the trials of protesters and denying them bail.

Later in the day, the High Court ordered the release of pastor Evan Mawarire, a prominent activist who has been charged with subversion for calling a three-day stayaway in protest at the rise in fuel prices.

Meanwhile, police say they have arrested an officer seen assaulting a protester in a TV report.

President Emmerson Mnangagwa had ordered the arrest of three men caught on camera assaulting a handcuffed civilian on Saturday.

The officer arrested on Tuesday, Constable Mukamire, had been off duty as he had been suspended in September 2018, the police statement said.

"The security services have always been emphasising that bogus and rogue elements are responsible for acts of lawlessness, which are tarnishing good standing of the security forces," police spokesperson Charity Charamba said.

She urged members of the public who had "suffered similar ordeals" to come forward and report such incidents to the police.

'My dreams were destroyed': poverty costs child brides dear in Zimbabwe

Married off at 13, Maureen lost her education and her health. Her plight is common in a country racked by economic turmoil

By Nyasha Chingono

The Guardian (04.01.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2Sxp1m5> - The end of Maureen's days at a primary school in north-eastern Zimbabwe marked the beginning of her life as a wife.

At 13, the brightest student in her class in Mudzi, Mashonaland, she was married to a man three times her age.

Her father, a poor farmer, had promised to fund Maureen's secondary education but, when the time came, he could not raise the money. Marrying off his daughter was a quick fix. Maureen swiftly fell pregnant and was still 13 when she gave birth after spending hours in labour. The baby did not survive.

Three years on and Maureen is at Chinhoyi provincial hospital. She is among the scores of underage brides being cared for here who are suffering from obstetric fistula, caused by prolonged labour.

"I haven't forgiven my parents for doing this to me. I had a bright future but now they treat me like an outcast," says Maureen.

When my parents told me about the marriage I couldn't believe it, because they had always given me the impression that I was their most intelligent child and I would pursue my studies. The man was abusive, he called me names and beat me several times, especially after I lost my baby," she says. "My dreams were destroyed by that man."

Child marriage in Zimbabwe is often driven by poverty. Dowries offer a welcome, if brief, respite from penury in poor households struggling to weather a vicious economic crisis. The brides, though, are more likely to remain in a state of privation due to lack of personal development and education.

Although underage marriage is illegal and local organisations have been fighting against it as an economic transaction, the financial meltdown has worsened the situation. About one in every three girls in Zimbabwe is married before the age of 18, the legal age of consent.

According to campaign organisation Girls Not Brides, families see little worth in girls.

"In many communities, economic opportunities are severely limited, especially for girls and women. Families therefore see little value in educating their daughters and instead marry them off to fulfil the role of a wife and mother," says a Girls Not Brides spokesperson.

Zimbabwe is facing an acute shortage of cash and, as basic commodities disappear from the shelves, families' disposable income has been depleted.

Rights defenders say child marriage, outlawed by the Zimbabwean constitutional court in 2016, has spiralled in the rural areas that constitute 75% of the country.

Kresi, 16, from Masvingo, is another teenager whose future was jeopardised when she was married off to a cattle farmer in her village. Her family received a dowry of two cows and a few groceries in exchange for Kresi. She also suffers from obstetric fistula, a hole between the genital tract and bladder or rectum caused by lengthy or obstructed labour.

Women and girls who experience obstetric fistula suffer constant incontinence, shame, social segregation and further health problems. It is estimated that more than 2 million young women in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa live with the condition untreated.

"I felt cheap and abused. My mates are in high school doing well for themselves. [My family] had no business selling me off. Now I have this condition which I cannot control. No one has even come to see me in this hospital," Kresi says, sobbing.

Tendai, 14, of Bindura says her family gave her away in exchange for 100 Zimbabwean dollars (22p).

She was married to a man with three wives. As the youngest wife, Tendai is burdened with both child-bearing and work in the fields.

"I still want to go back to school. I just hope my husband can give me that chance. But as the youngest wife I have to do everything here at home," Tendai says.

She is bitter over her parent's decision to marry her off.

With a drought looming and disposable incomes depleted from galloping inflation, poor families are more likely to exchange their daughter for very little.

"In areas like Binga, Matabeleland, the dowry can be a goat, which is an insult to the value of the girl. In some instances families just leave their child at the man's house to lessen their own burden," says Grace Maunganidze, a local activist.

Another activist, Abigail Mutema, blames child marriages on the stronghold of a patriarchal society.

"Until women are emancipated, child marriages will never end. In some of the communities, girls as young as 16 are deemed too old, so they need to get married. There is nothing to do in the rural areas, so the easier route is to get married. Poverty plays a role in these child marriages," says Mutema.

"Older women have become perpetrators of these early child marriages. A woman is not complete without marriage, they say."

Prominent Zimbabwean men volunteer to champion gender equality, fight violence

United Nations Zimbabwe (26.11.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2Rk3ugn> - The Embassy of Sweden and United Nations in Zimbabwe jointly launched a campaign called "Because I am A Man" today featuring 16 influential Zimbabwean men to lead the way in the fight to end violence against women, girls and boys.

Addressing the media and over 70 participants at the launch held on the Embassy of Sweden's office grounds, Her Excellency Sofia Calltorp, Ambassador of Sweden said, "In order to eradicate gender-based violence, we all need to come together, both women and

men. But especially men. In their roles as fathers, brothers, husbands and as fellow human beings, men of all ages are key to bringing this violence to an end.”

It is hoped that by involving men in the conversation about the negative consequences of harmful behaviours including violence against women, girls and boys, the campaign will influence the Zimbabwean society at-large to view gender equality as a norm to aspire for.

Co-launching the campaign the UN Resident Coordinator, Mr. Bishow Parajuli said, “Violence against women, girls and boys is a grave violation of human rights and an affront to the inherent equality and dignity of women. It is high time men hold each other accountable for their actions towards women, girls and boys and prevent the continued normalization of gender-based violence. It is also important for influential men in society to stand in solidarity with women, girls and boys and show their support for them.”

The “Because I am a Man” campaign was launched at the Embassy of Sweden with the official reveal of 16 art works featuring the men taking a strong stance against gender-based violence. The showcased men were present at the event and were able to speak about the messages that they represent in the campaign.

It is often the case that women and girls are met with doubt when they speak about the abuse they have faced and even stigmatized by their communities as a result. Under the banner “Because I am a Man” the 16 men are taking a strong stand against all types of gender-based violence, including, but not limited to, physical and verbal harassment, physical and sexual abuse of women and children as well as forced child marriages and other harmful practices.

It is estimated in Zimbabwe that about 1 in 3 women aged 15 to 49 have experienced physical violence and about 1 in 4 women have experienced sexual violence since the age of 15. As with any violation of human rights, one is one too many.

The 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-based Violence is an opportunity to mobilize activists, organizations and communities worldwide to take action to end this type of violence. The 16 men representing each day of the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-based Violence with their key messages and commitment will go a long way in galvanizing communities in Zimbabwe to end violence against women, girls and boys.

16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence was first launched in 1991 by Center for Women’s Global Leadership, making it the longest-running campaign for women’s rights globally.

Each year, it starts on 25 November (International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women) and continues through to 10 December (Human Rights Day) with the aim of galvanizing global action to end the violence against women and girls in every corner of the world.
