

Voices from Zimbabwe

Constance Mugari, Director of the Women Advocacy Project (WAP) on child marriage and poverty in Zimbabwe

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

Zimbabwe has for many years been facing an acute shortage of cash and, as basic commodities disappear from the shelves, families' disposable income has been exhausted. Child marriage, outlawed by the Zimbabwean constitutional court in 2016, has spiralled in most part of Zimbabwe both in urban and rural areas. In some of the communities, girls as young as 16 are deemed too old, so they need to get married. Poverty plays a role in these child marriages and with disposable incomes depleted from galloping inflation, poor families are more likely to exchange their daughter for very little.

The implementation of the Clean Girl liquid soap making project by Women Advocacy Project in most poor communities of Harare including Epworth, Chitungwiza, Mbare, Waterfalls and Eyre Court is being described as a positive move towards the economic empowerment and lifesaving for vulnerable and marginalized girls and women. They have begun to gain hope to life and self-assurance through engaging into manufacturing and selling dishwashing liquid soap, an income generating project that is helping them sustain their households, enrol back to school and reduce the prevalence of forced, early child marriage.

During a regular monitoring exercise in Chitungwiza, a 15 year old young single mother who is a member of the "Give us books, Not Husband" girls club which was initiated by WAP and a beneficiary of the Clean Girl project told WAP that, "at the age of 14 years, I was the brightest student in my class, I was impregnated by a man who is three times my age –sugar daddy- lied to me that he was going to take good care of me. By then my father was a farmer, very poor. He had promised to fund my secondary education, but when the time came, he could not raise the money. Marrying me off was the only quick fix he could think of. From that day, my life changed from bad to worse. The man my father forced me to marry refused me and turned me back to my father's house. I endured the pain of nursing the pregnancy until I gave birth. Later my father took ill and remains weak that he can no longer do anything. My mother is a vendor, she cannot manage to send me to school and support my child at the same time. However, I am happy today, I can now find hope again through the clean girl project. As we are selling our soap, I used my share to enrol myself back to school. I also hope I can now be able to supply the little I can to my child.

In addition, the project is regarded by many as an initiative that will bring hope to various young women single mothers and girls who have previously dropped out of schools because they did not have money to pay school fees. They now have the confidence and determination that one day they can return back to school. It has also helped the disadvantaged young women and girls to socially and economically broaden their perception of women's roles as leaders in their families and communities by helping improve self-esteem and leadership potential.

Clean Girl Soap Project – a Solution to unemployment and the plight of Child marriage.

As unemployment remains high in Zimbabwe, poverty has taken momentum to the level where daughters are sometimes married off by their families to reduce their perceived economic burden with the bride price (lobola) used as a means of survival. When asked to give an account of what impact this project has brought in girls lives, Evelyn Sachiti the ambassador in Chitungwiza and Trish Makanhiwa who leads the other club in Epworth said "The Soap making project has created self employment for girls and reduced child marriages in our communities". "We are now able to work as girls using our own hands and have improved our income. The sales of soap have made it possible that we can now take care of ourselves and help our families to attain basic needs which were hard to access in the past before the start of the clean girl project" said Trish.

Evelyn added that "before we began the project, many of us had no occupation; we used to wonder around, with some ending up in unplanned relationships which led many of our friends into unwanted sex, unplanned pregnancies and early child marriages. Many thanks go to WAP for initiating this very significant project which has equipped us with important skills that have remained central to our lives. We now have a job that keeps us busy, producing, packing and marketing our product. It has helped us not to fall into the traps of boys, hence reducing child marriages.

WAP has truly empowered us as girls. We have gained skills, knowledge and income and are in fact grateful. The soap making project together with the weekly educational sessions are factual bid to ending early child marriages. We can see a reduction in the number of girls who were at risk of getting into child marriages. Though facing some challenges due to our economy, the project has helped us a lot to cater for our immediate need including accessing our sanitary wear".

The Clean Girl project is not only helping to end child marriage, but also becoming a response and one of the key strategies that provide a powerful mechanism for young people's job creation, particularly young women and girls who are a vital resource for the national economic and social development. We do strongly believe that extending this project will promote development and empowerment for the young women and girls. It will also encourage their full participation in the economy.