



August 2021

# The SRHR

## Bulletin



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## Editor's Note

Access to sexual reproductive health rights should not stop because there is COVID 19. Young girls still need sanitary pads to use during menstruation. SRHR information is still needed in rural communities where cases of teenage pregnancies and arranged marriages have been increasing.

As a result, in this edition, we show how the presence of COVID 19 and the measures put forward to mitigate the spread have increased young girls vulnerability in Matabeleland South. We show the impact of traditional and religious practices in the access of SRHR as well as the progress made by duty bearers in improving the state of SRHR in the three project areas which are Matobo, Umzingwane and Gwanda Districts.

This edition also shows the activities implemented by CYDT to increase Gender Based Violence sensitization amidst rising cases of GBV in the province. For months, CYDT has been training young people to become essential SRHR champions, and in this edition, we show the role of SRHR champions in the dissemination of SRHR information.

Last but not least, this edition includes youth testimonies; telling readers how the SRHR project being commissioned by CYDT has affected their lives.

Happy readings folks!

*Bongie*



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## Girl child vulnerability increases as COVID 19 intensifies



Another young person said: "Spending more time at home doing nothing has increased girls' vulnerability, especially those living in rural areas. Schools closure and national lockdowns restrictions meant that it was difficult for these girls to access essential sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) information. As a result, many of them indulged in sexual activities without proper knowledge, hence the soaring cases of teenage pregnancies in Matabeleland South."

The youth went on to say that SRHR violators were taking the presence of COVID 19 as an opportunity to trick young girls into marriages as well as sleeping with them.

"With young girls isolated from social networks which they use to access SRHR information, some men are using that as an opportunity to lure young girls who most of them are from poverty stricken families. They will promise to take good care of them if they agree to marry them but will disappear after sleeping with them," she said.

Teenage pregnancies and child marriages have drastically increased in Matabeleland South province as COVID 19-induced lockdown resulted in the protracted closure of schools, leaving many girls cut off from support systems intended to protect them from abuse.

A recent report presented in Parliament by Women's Affairs minister Sithembiso Nyoni shows that about 5 000 teenage pregnancies and nearly 2 000 child marriages were recorded in the first two months of the year.

Matabeleland South, which became second according to the report, recorded 290 teenage pregnancies and 65 child marriages, while Mashonaland Central topped the numbers with 4 475 teenage pregnancies and 1 436 child marriages.

With health systems buckling, economies overstretched and livelihoods disrupted by the COVID 19, some parents in the province are forcing their daughters into arranged marriages to escape abject poverty.

One youth said: "When these things are spoken about, people think they are just far-fetched stories or myths, but these things are really happening."

The youth recalled a situation in which a family lost their daughter to suicide after trying to force her into an arranged marriage.

"We are living in scary and difficult times where parents do the unthinkable to escape poverty. Some decisions made by parents are just sickening. How do you marry off your teenage daughter to a 50 year old man? More protection is needed for these young girls because most of them find it difficult to stand up against their own parents, hence choose to commit suicide," the youth said.

She said the soaring cases of COVID 19 have trapped young girls who are now deprived of health related information due to schools closure while others are finding it difficult to access contraceptives.

While the law allows pregnant young girls to continue attending school, those expecting young girls are victims of ridicule and stigmatization which is a reason many of them opt to drop out of school.

One female youth said: "From being used as an example by teachers to being ridiculed by your own colleagues; pregnant girls suffer the worst treatment at school. Teachers will be going around talking about you instead of sympathizing while you will also be a subject of ridicule among your classmates."

She said there were stigmas and myths surrounding pregnant girls at school such as "if a pregnant girl attends class, she will make others fall asleep, hence risking the performance of other students."

These beliefs force pregnant young girls to stop pursuing their education.

A youth told the Community Youth Development Trust that collective efforts from all stakeholders were needed to increase the protection and wellbeing of young people during COVID 19 period.

"We need to stand united if we are to win this battle. We need the community to stand side by side with young girls. Duty bearers must develop ways to improve access to SRHR services," she said.



## Access to SRHR: The impact of traditional, religious practices amidst COVID -19



For a longtime, traditional and religious dogmas have been at odds with modern rules and laws that seek to improve the sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) of women and young girls.

In most cases, under traditional and cultural beliefs, women are disproportionately sexualized and objectified. Their views are trivialised by their male counterparts who are viewed as think-tanks or philosophers capable of making sound decisions for 'their' women. It is against this background that some fathers arrange marriages for their daughters without their consent.

In rural areas, girls are still subjected to sexual degradation as some of them are still forced to go through sexual initiation processes while others are denied access to their SRHR by their fathers who stop them from getting tested for any sexually transmitted diseases.

The same goes with some religious beliefs that have brainwashed young girls and women alike into believing that they can be well taken care of by their prophets and church pastors instead of seeking sexual health services in hospitals and clinics.

Traditional and religious practices have strived glaringly since the outbreak of the COVID 19 pandemic, as due to travel restrictions, young girls and women have resorted to traditional healers for their health issues. Those seeking maternal health care have been reported to be allegedly sleeping on the floor as maternity homes in hospitals have been overwhelmed by pregnant women.

The treatment by health practitioners is also alleged to be harsh due to fear of contracting COVID-19. The situation in hospitals has resurrected the works of traditional midwives as more people are now opting for traditional and religious ways

of taking care of their SRHR.

The traditional midwives, who have gained their experience through helping women giving birth usually in non-hospital setups, have become an option for pregnant women who understand the situation in hospitals.

One concerned young woman from Gwanda said: "More beds are needed in Gwanda maternity section and other hospitals in Matabeleland South. The scene in maternity homes will make one understand the suffrage that is faced by our mothers. Action from duty bearers is required urgently," she said.

"After giving birth, mothers are discharged faster than expected with doctors claiming they are also afraid of contracting the virus. At the end of the day, some expecting women see the treatment they receive when they seek services of midwives as better than the ones received in hospitals," she said.

However, most traditional practices are not health proven. Instead, they put the lives of those receiving traditional treatments at risk to several health complications. Some pregnant women claim after drinking some prepared traditional medicines they become dizzy and sometimes feel like vomiting, and when they tell their traditional healers or midwives of these complications, they are often told that this is the way the medicine works.

"Many times, women have no option but to seek help outside hospitals. The existing health services in Matabeleland South province offer limited support. However, midwives offer much needed care like checking up their patients all the time, giving you advice and relief medicines.

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## SRHR Champions in information dissemination drive

**H**aving attended training on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) advocacy organized by the Community Youth Development Trust (CYDT), SRHR champions have taken the initiative to share the information learnt with their peers.

SRHR violations have been on the increase in the Matabeleland South province since the outbreak of the COVID-19.

Since CYDT, a non-profit organisation, embarked on an SRHR project early this year, hundreds of young people in the three target areas—Matobo, Gwanda and Umzingwane—have been equipped with SRHR information. They have been taught about SRHR; what are they, who to call or lobby when experiencing SRHR challenges or violations, and laws that mandate their access to SRHR.

In recent months, cases of sexual abuse, gender-based violence (GBV) and challenges in accessing sanitary wear in the context of COVID 19 have been increasing, and SRHR champions have embarked on a “Tell a Friend to Tell a Friend” Campaign.

This is a campaign in which every SRHR champion is sharing what he or she learnt on SRHR with friends to help those with limited SRHR information. It is quite pleasing and encouraging to note that the trained champions have not been lying idle but have been going around sharing SRHR information within their communities at a time the country is under level 4 lockdown where gatherings are prohibited, making SRHR information dissemination a challenge.

Information on access to family planning is key during this time where movement is restricted; hence the champions are sharing these critical details on where one can access these services. The champions that spoke to CYDT said during lockdown they have noted that GBV cases have increased, hence the need to increase awareness to their peers. They also told their peers where to report these cases and assist those who have been abused to get counseling at a nearby victim friendly and one stop center.

One of the champions, Sithandazile Ndlovu had this to

say: “Most young women are afraid to report their partners when they abuse them; they still feel it is embarrassing for people to know that they are being abused, hence I saw the need to encourage young women to report such cases so as to avoid cases of murder at home.”

Ndlovu said she felt challenged after being trained on SRHR to take action as a young woman and make a difference in her community.

“Having been trained on SRHR, I felt challenged as to what it is that I am doing as a young person to change the state of SRHR in Gwanda. I then decided to act and share the knowledge I have learnt with other youths”.



Primrose Ncube

Another youth from Umzingwane district, Thabani Mpofu said as a young man, being an SRHR champion challenged him to rise up and be a responsible young man. “I encourage my fellow mates to practice safe sex and be responsible so as to avoid contracting sexual transmitted infections (STIs) and being fathers at a young age. I also share with them information that we learnt during training on where to get condoms and other services,” he said.

The champions also said they are now able to take up SRHR issues noted in their communities to relevant authorities. In rural communities, issues to do with abuse and rape are usually concealed in a bid to protect the family name at the expense of the victims. Primrose Ncube from

Matobo said she discovered that there was an eight-year old girl who was being abused by her 16 year old cousin. She spoke to the young girl who shared all the details with her which she further shared with relevant stakeholders.

“I visited the family and spoke to the grandmother and the child who finally opened up and narrated the whole story. I took the issue to the Social Welfare Department who further engaged the police and also took the victim to the hospital,” said Ncube.

She told CYDT officers that they have taken a step further as SRHR champions to target miners who are mostly the perpetrators of sexual abuses as they have money to bribe young ladies from speaking the truth.



## CYDT, stakeholders in GBV awareness partnership

The Community Youth Development Trust (CYDT) reaffirmed its commitment to eliminate gender-based violence (GBV) in Matobo, Umzingwane and Gwanda districts by partnering with the local government, district development co-ordinator's office and other stakeholders to fight against the vice through awareness roadshows.

In the context of COVID 19, GBV cases have gone up in these areas. The outbreak of the coronavirus gave birth to measures designed to flatten the pandemic curve.

But these measures that include lockdowns and social distancing inadvertently shrank social spaces which affected women and young girls immensely while unfortunately favoring those who abuse women on the basis of gender.

The roadshows brought awareness that gender based violence is not only about being beaten on the basis of gender but also includes psychological, sexual and emotional violence. Hence, it is imperative that any woman experiencing any form of GBV report the matter to relevant authorities like the police and human rights organisations.

After receiving this clarification, one woman who spoke with CYDT in one of the roadshows revealed that for a long time, women have been abused through gendered work. "As a woman, you are supposed to go fetch water, carrying a 20 litre bucket sometimes making 10 trips a day. After that you have to look for firewood, bath children, cook and do all the laundry. At the end of the day, you will be psychologically, emotionally and physically drained," she said.

The young woman who said she has been married for two years revealed that her marriage is full of suffering, pain and hard work rather than love.

"In the eyes of our in-laws, we are simply slaves and when you try to voice your concerns and opinions, you risk being beaten and chased away by your husband. Our health and wellbeing does not really matter. The situation has exacerbated since the outbreak of COVID 19. Challenges have doubled.

In some cases, only women are forced to bath the body of a deceased person despite knowing there is COVID 19. All this has lasting psychological effects in our minds," she said.

The organisation roped in local artists who used their artistic skills to disseminate GBV information. For instance, in Maphisa District local artists delivered poems that carried essential GBV information. People passing by and those in their homes got access to the information that was delivered as a hailer that was used in the roadshows had the capacity to reach out to them.

Women were encouraged to avoid walking alone in bushy areas or at night as abusers take that as an opportunity to prey on them. Another key message was directed to law enforcement agents like the police. The police were told to be on guard and continue monitoring the community and ensure that people were observing social distancing as well as following the national curfew guidelines. It was noted that abusers take advantage of the lack of security to move at night, violating women.

Women were encouraged to speak out against GBV as most of them are still influenced by traditional ideologies and myths that have often relegated them to mere household materials who should not challenge their male partners when they beat or sexually abuse them. In addition, women were told to report cases of GBV to the police, local leaders, religious leaders as well as community-based organisations (CBOs).

The community was urged to support women amidst rising cases of GBV. It was indicated that the abusers are not foreigners to the community but people who live amongst them, hence a united community will be able to flash out these women abusers. Parents were encouraged to monitor their sons especially those who leave at night as they could be possible women abusers.

They were also advised to talk with their children about GBV, the importance of respecting women and enhancing their protection. Husbands were encouraged to see women as equal partners not punching bags.

### Access to SRHR: The impact of traditional, religious practices amidst COVID -19

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They are like your private and personal doctor, something you can never receive at public hospitals especially amidst COVID 19. The only problem is when complications arise as these midwives services do not guarantee best care," she said.

On the side of religion, there are churches that are strongly against their own members accessing SRHR in hospitals. These churches encourage members to trust in "in the holy water" that has been prayed for rather than going to a hospital to seek medication. One youth said: "People easily believe in the services given by their church leaders. They follow everything they say. It's like the word of their leaders is final. This is the reason some girls easily agree when their elders or church leaders decide to marry them despite the significant difference in age," she said.

The youth that spoke with the Community Youth Development Trust (CYDT) said many bad things were happening in the guise of worshipping in different religious institutions, and in most situations, these unwanted activities go on without being noticed and reported.

Currently, Matabeleland South is one of the provinces with prevalent cases of teenage pregnancies and child marriages in Zimbabwe. All these can be attributed to the traditional and religious practices that are striving in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. All stakeholders must join forces and increase health services in the province. This will ensure that all pregnant women and young girls seeking health services are served adequately.

In another related incident, the police are currently investigating a case where a 14 year old girl reportedly died while giving birth at a church shrine in Marange. The police's reaction comes after a lot of organizations, communities and individuals made a lot of noise on social media platforms about the incident. This shows there is still a lot of work to be done in order to demystify traditional and religious practices in Zimbabwe.

## SRHR champions share testimonies

### Phanankosi Lungile Malaba

Some time back, a friend of mine presented me and reproductive and health rights (SRHR) decision to attend the meeting paid off a At the first meeting, we were taught we learnt how to recognize our ed, for example by harmful cultur-access free services like family before. I later learnt that these space to interact with each other,

In our next meeting, we were affecting the youth with promi-care providers and counselors. make suggestions on how SRHR can adults may assist in the process. My me understand different issues that affect ing society in terms of sexual reproductive is- but instead it is normal. The project has also helped me grow career wise because being a social worker student I feel I am now in a better position to help and educate my peers on SRHR. Therefore, I am truly honored and grateful to have been part of this project.



with an opportunity and invited me to attend the sexual meeting of which I agreed. It is safe to say that the great deal as I am now a regular to these forums. about SRHR, and the topic itself was broad: rights and also when they are being violat-al practices. We were also taught how to planning, which I had no idea were free SRHR meetings provide youth with a safe discussing various issues that affect us.

given the opportunity to discuss issues nent members of society such as health From this meeting the youth were able to be recognized even more, and how the overall experience is that the project helped the youth and it really opened new ways of view-sues. I learnt that there is nothing to be ashamed of

I feel I am now in a better position to help and educate my peers on SRHR. Therefore, I am truly honored and grateful to have been part of this project.

### Sithenjisiwe Nyoni

The SRHR project helped us a lot as young women. For a long time, we had no knowledge about our SRHR. Things like what to do when someone has been sexually abused or denied access to contraceptives. The Community Youth Development Trust (CYDT) project has really opened our eyes. The project taught us, as teenagers, on how to protect ourselves against disease like HIV/AIDS by using condoms. It also made known our sexual rights as young women not to be coerced by parents into early child marriages. The project also taught us where to report our cases in terms of gender-based violence (GBV), and also as young women, we did not know that during menstruation using dirty clothes is harmful to our health. The project taught us to use pads. We are now aware that we should share the knowledge that we have been given by CYDT to other young people who are yet to access this information. We are grateful for the SRHR project!



### Lovedale Mpofu

As



a youth, this SRHR program has taken me to another level which I can call a good level. I now know that we are equal, especially in the context of gender. Whether one is male or female we are just the same and equal. The SRHR project has helped me as a male youth to understand that we should support our sisters to access better health services especially when they are facing SRHR challenges such as failing to access sanitary pads. I am happy to say that I can now go into a shop and buy pads for my little sister. I have also been spreading awareness on the importance of using condoms when having sexual intercourse to prevent the spread of sexually transmitted diseases like HIV and AIDS as well as the importance of respecting women's decisions. For instance, when a woman does not want to engage into sexual activities or she says NO to unprotected sex, it's a NO, not a maybe or a

## Align age of consent, marriage laws—policy makers told



The age of consent has received renewed criticism as teenage pregnancies continue to rise in Matabeleland South province. Hundreds of young girls have fallen pregnant and dropped out of school since the country went on national lockdown last year to curb the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Some are already young mothers in need of essential health services to protect the lives of their babies, and according to women-led bodies, this is a result of the confusion, gaps and inconsistencies that exist within the age of consent and marriage policies.

Across the world, there is no official age benchmark for consent due to the fact that countries have varying cultures, traditions, norms and beliefs, of which the Constitution and laws are formed from. The legal age of consent specific to Zimbabwe is set at 16 years under Section 70 of the Criminal Code which has often raised criticism due to the fact that the legal age of marriage is set at 18 years.

Majority of stakeholders say the legal age of consent must be aligned with the legal age of marriage as the two year difference between the age of consent and marriage has largely contributed to the ongoing confusion surrounding the age of consent.

Views collected by the Community Youth Development Trust (CYDT) from different stakeholders, including young people, indicate growing concerns over the age of consent. The dominant view is that children at the age of 16 and 17 years are going to be used for sex and dumped by older men claiming that they cannot marry minors.

Recently, CYDT held a radio program on this contentious issue and all panelists agreed that setting the age of consent at 16 years was inconsistent with other policies that seek to protect young people's sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). They pointed out that it was not fair that in the Constitution of Zimbabwe, the legal age of marriage is 18 while setting the age of consent at 16.

A legal practitioner from Zimbabwe Women Lawyers Association, Thembelani Sibanda said it was logical that the majority of people want the age of consent to be aligned with the legal age of marriage.

"Section 70 of the Criminal Act allows an older person to go to bed with a 16 year old which is in conflict with the ruling of the Mujuru case in January 2016 that abolished child marriages. In my opinion, I feel the sexual age of consent should be 18 years, as the law regards anyone under 18 as a minor," the legal practitioner said.

"Marriage Act 5.1.1 allows a minor to get married while still young. This law leaves a gap for child marriages. There is no particular enabling act that enforces the abolished law. It's a crime to marry a minor but there is no particular and clear Act to enforce this law," Sibanda added.

The youth speaker, Primrose Ncube argued that the age of consent does not protect the right of a 16 year old who is usually in Form 3 or 4 and yet are said to be in the right frame of mind to consent to sex.

She said a 16 year old is not emotionally ready to make sexual decisions; hence a 16 year old should be treated as a child as most decisions made by a 16 year old are due to peer pressure.

"Our Constitution needs amendment on the age of consent. Allowing sexual consent at 16 and marriage at 18 is not logical. Marriage and sex policies must be hand in glove," she said. Ncube added that traditionally and culturally, sex is a practice that happens after marriage, and based on that, the age of consent was supposed to be in tandem with the legal age of marriage.

The speakers agreed that all stakeholders must hold discussions to solve the gaps, inconsistencies and contradicting statements within the existing age of consent policies and laws to fully protect the SRHR of young people.