Girls Issues in rural Zambia

In rural Zambia girls face many problems that put their health at risk, preventing them from getting a good education and fulfilling their potential. The cycle of poverty starts early and they are most vulnerable during adolescence. Born into poor families many girls fail to stay in school; many are tempted to have sex for money - just to survive or buy simple things, like a pen for school; or are married as early as 13 or 14 because their family cannot afford to feed them. By their late teens they often have children, no husband and may have an STD or AIDS.
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Problems and issues facing girls in rural Zambia in 2014

So what are these issues and problems?
When we talk of families in rural Zambia we include the extended family where an uncle or aunt may have taken in children belonging to a brother or sister; or a widowed grandmother, on little or no income, caring for her deceased children’s children; or even child headed families where there is no adult at all. So when we look at the problems faced by girls we must also look behind the scenes at their background and home life.

Cultural Traditions
Throughout the world girls will go through some form of initiation but the nature of it varies from country to country and tribe to tribe. The South Luangwa area is mostly inhabited by the Kunda tribe who may hold ceremonies depending on their finances. However these practices are slowly starting to die out a little.

First Menstruation
When a girl starts her first period she will go to an aunt, grandmother or just an older woman, but never to her mother. Certain traditions are observed and she is taught to care for herself at these times of the month. You can read more about this on our website.

Initiation
In addition, if the family has the funds, an initiation ceremony will take place which teaches far more to the girl as well as how to respect her elders, to dress and act respectably and so on. It is conducted by a matron or apongu (sp) with the help of village women. Sometimes, if the family is poor or if the girl is not already engaged to be married, this ceremony may be split into two; the first taking place just after puberty and the second just before marriage. Some ceremonies are quite explicit but are a closely guarded secret of the Kunda women. We respect their confidence and privacy and so are unable to tell you too much of these ceremonies in detail.

Traditionally the Kunda do not practice genital mutilation involving cutting. However girls are shown how to stretch the labia minora by frequent pulling.

Home life and who goes to school?
Whilst most kids help out at home, girls are usually given far more home chores than boys. This often means that before and after school girls may have to fetch water from the borehole (this may take several trips), sweep the area outside the house, do the washing up and care for younger siblings. At weekends she may have to do the family washing. An average rural school girl’s day starts at 5:00 and she is in school by 7:00 but, by the time she has returned home and completed the evening chores, it may be too dark for homework and not all families can afford candles.

A family with little resources will send a son, rather than a daughter, to school as traditionally the education of girls is thought of as less important. Families, teachers and schools often do not expect a girl to perform as well, academically, as a boy and this can lead to a girl developing low expectations of herself and low self esteem.
The age of consent in Zambia is 16 but a girl may marry before this provided she has attained puberty and, so long as her guardians have agreed to the marriage, it is her husband's right to have sex with her - whatever her age.

Even today in rural areas girls under 16 may be encouraged into marriage by their parents or grandparents or poor families struggling to feed themselves may marry off a girl shortly after she reaches puberty. Young girls may also marry due to pressure from friends whilst others become pregnant but remain unmarried.

Zambian children are traditionally taught to show respect to their elders but this puts girls in a vulnerable position if they are approached for sexual favours. Girls, especially orphans who are sent to live with their extended family, may be approached by family members, and it is not unknown for school pupils to be coerced into sex by men in authority.

Prostitution exists in many areas of Zambia and Mfuwe is no exception. Single mothers and other vulnerable women may take to ‘subsistence prostitution’, relying on it for an income in order to feed their families or earning money only when the need arises. It is not unknown for girls from poor families to offer sex in return for uniform or stationery or to encourage an older man as a ‘boy friend’ who will pay their school fees.
**Health and Menstruation**

Early pregnancies are all too common in rural areas of Zambia and another reason why girls drop out of school. Their young bodies are not ready for childbirth and this, coupled with poor health, untrained village midwives or help from clinics situated far from many rural villages means that girls’ health and lives are put at risk. Some girls still in primary level education, often as young as 12 or 14, are reported pregnant or already have a child.

The traditional practice of dry sex, (intercourse without lubrication) demanded by some rural Zambian men, contributes to a higher risk of contracting HIV/AIDS. Girls living in rural areas of Zambia have little or no access to, or cannot afford modern commercially-produced disposable sanitary pads and are taught by older women what to use instead. Cloth torn from a ‘Chitenge’ (rather like a sarong) is traditionally used but this is bulky and doesn’t stay in place so girls will stay at home, particularly from school during their menses. This means that they miss lessons for around 1 week in every four - that’s 25% of lessons or, during their four years of secondary education, a whole year of schooling. More on this subject at [www.projectluangwa.org/healthandmenstruation](http://www.projectluangwa.org/healthandmenstruation)

**Gender Based Violence**

Violence towards children and, in particular violence and sexual abuse of girls, is a worldwide problem, but in many parts of Africa it is even worse due to certain traditional beliefs and a limited access to support groups. Find out more at [www.projectluangwa.org/gbv](http://www.projectluangwa.org/gbv)

**Role models**

There are very few female role models in rural areas; the Education Board rarely sends female teachers to the remote schools and, with no television, newspapers or magazines, girls see only the same possibilities that were available to their mothers and grandmothers. The importance of school fades quickly when all that awaits you is planting maize.

According to Zambian Government statistics, about 12,000 cases of Gender Based Violence (GBV) were recorded in 2011 alone; this included over two thousand cases of defilement.

‘Defilement’ - to have sexual intercourse with a child under the age of 16.

Between 2007 and 2010 the number of reported cases of defilement increased by 347%, from 696 to 2419. (Central Statistics Office)

41% of Zambian women who had experienced physical or sexual violence did not report it or seek help from any source. (ZDHS 2007)

30% of surveyed girls aged 15 - 19 were pregnant or already caring for children; their pregnancies were often the result of sexual violence. (ZDHS 2007)

47% of Zambian women have suffered physical violence since the age of 15; 77% by their husband. (ZDHS 2007)

* ZDHS Zambia Demographic and Health Survey 2007
Further reading: check out the links on [www.projectluangwa.org/pressandpublishedstudies](http://www.projectluangwa.org/pressandpublishedstudies)
What are we doing to help?

Sponsorship
We arrange school sponsorship for vulnerable girls (and boys) who show potential. We may offer boarding school accommodation to girls who have difficult home and this can dramatically improve their academic performance. One sponsored pupil’s test results showed that she was failing in all subjects with scores of less than 30% but, after just one term in boarding, she achieved passes in the region of 75% to 85%. We arrange for pupils of both sexes to be sponsored by individual sponsors and encourage both to regularly correspond. This often results in a girl feeling, maybe for the first time, that someone cares. You can find out more about sponsorship at www.projectluangwa.org/sponsorship.

Drama
Two years ago we commissioned a local professional drama group, SEKA, to produce a play tackling some of the issues facing girls and gave them, as local Zambians, a completely free hand. They came up with a story of school girls pressured into having sex, getting pregnant but eventually returning to school and going to university. These sensitive issues are dealt with using humour and audience participation and the discussions afterwards can bring up some interesting points. Seka themselves choose the venues - usually a school, or village where they have heard rumours of problems - for the play which costs $150 for a performance.

Menstrual Hygiene
To help girls deal with their menstrual hygiene management issues and in order to encourage them to attend lessons instead of staying at home during their period we are developing washable, reusable menstrual hygiene products. We’ve done plenty of local research as well as looking at how washable pads are accepted in other cultures in Africa and around the world. We’ve looked at different designs too; and will finally go into production in 2015. To find out more about this project check out www.projectluangwa.org/mhm.

Special female loos
We have designed and built two blocks of female hygiene toilets at Mfuwe Secondary School to help girls wash in total privacy especially during their period.
**Girls’ Clubs**

In 2013 Project Luangwa started a ‘pilot project’ Girls’ Club at Mfuwe Day Secondary School. It was kept deliberately small and catered for the 25 sponsored pupils whom we already knew to be vulnerable. Club members have mixed backgrounds and their varied home lives and experiences are typical of girls throughout Africa, but they all have something in common; they are bright, intelligent, caring girls who deserve the chance to achieve.

The club is all about gaining greater self esteem and encouraging girls to stay in school. Our activities include self-empowerment exercises, talking to role models, learning new craft or technical skills or chatting about our hopes, fears and feelings - but sometimes we just spend time having fun. Our club members are very proactive; they write poetry and presentations on some very difficult subjects, such as rape or early marriage. You can read their poems at [www.projectluangwa.org/poemvirgin](http://www.projectluangwa.org/poemvirgin), [www.projectluangwa.org/poemconfidence](http://www.projectluangwa.org/poemconfidence) and [www.projectluangwa.org/poempersistance](http://www.projectluangwa.org/poempersistance).

Some sessions start by reading a chapter of one of the Sara Life Skills books in which the difficult issues faced by African girls are woven into entertaining plots. Sara, the heroine, handles difficult situations whilst remaining respectful of her elders and maintaining cultural sensitivity. The following discussions often go off on tangents and one nurse who recently helped at the club wrote, “... from the simple Sara book about ‘not dancing too soon’ we escalated through having more than one boyfriend, vaginal thrush, feelings about abortion and finally, a demonstration (fully clothed I might add) on the best way to wash the ‘girlie bits’. Everyone was keen to know and we all had a great laugh about it, it was great.”

Some club members have experienced abuse and an important part of the club is to provide a discreet, safe haven where they can confide to someone in times of trouble.

As we approach our Girls’ Club’s first birthday we have taken a step back to look at its effectiveness. We have seen how our girls have increased self esteem, are more confident and have developed a proactive approach to life rather than an attitude of waiting for something to happen to them. They are more comfortable talking about personal issues, reporting abuse and have developed into a group who support and help each other. Many tell us they feel more in control of their lives and feel in a better position to make choices about marriage, schools, careers and sex as well as more empowered to say ‘No’ when propositioned by boys, members of the extended family or adults in authority.
But it is not enough . . . .
During the last few years of working with girls in and around Mfuwe it has become clear that in order to fulfil their potential they need access to sanitary wear, to attend school regularly and, most importantly, to believe in themselves. And to do this they need a little help. But we have just one small club in one school . . . and work in an area with over 20 schools with many vulnerable girls who would all benefit from a girls’ club.

Raising funds
Now we need to raise funds to employ a ‘Gender Support Manager’ who can develop the Mfuwe club, provide counselling, careers advice, Life Skills training and much more. In order to run our current club more effectively we need to provide a base; a club house and sewing centre for the pad project (and more).

How you can help . . .
*By making a donation
Our most urgent need is funding. If you’d like to make a donation please go to our donate page and follow the instructions (don’t forget to tell us that your donation is for Gender Support) or check out our special Gender Support Virgin Giving page.

*By bringing craft supplies -
If you are visiting Zambia and can fit a few things in your bag to donate to the girls go to www.projectluangwa.org/howtohelpgirls to see what we need. If you can bring a travel bag full we can help you get it here from Lusaka send an email for instructions.

If you live in the UK we can help you send out a box full via the National Police Aid Convoys - email for more information.

*By coming to help
If you have a particular skill you might like to consider sharing it with the girls. Go to www.projectluangwa.org/teachskills to find out more.

We’ve already made a good start - with donated items and with fund raising for our Girls’ Clubs. Check out www.projectluangwa.org/howyoucanhelpgirls for more information about how you can help and up to date information about our fund raising.

It’s up to us - that’s you and me - to help these girls reach their potential.