

**Girls Empowerment Centres concept: Creating a safe haven for Abuse and Gender Based Violence Survivors**

**INTRODUCTION**

**SHAMWARI YEMWANASIKANA[[1]](#footnote-1) (SYS)** is a community based organisation that seeks to promote the rights and empowerment of the girl in the home, school and community. It is a registered trust (MA0000732/14) under the legal laws of Zimbabwe and is in the process of attaining Private Voluntary Organization registration. Since its inception in 2014, SYS has been a destination for the empowerment of the girl child and has played a significant role in emancipating the girl child from all forms of abuse that have and continue to hinder her development. The aim of the organization is to address the concerns of the girl child and protect her from all issues that have the potential to destroy her dreams, hopes and her full development. SYS envision a nation where girls are free and able to stand up for their rights, with full support from the community and policies.

Shamwari Yemwanasikana has three main departments which seek to provide holistic approach to achieving total emancipation as well as the empowerment of the girl childnamely:

* **Girls Protection and Support Services** department focuses on awareness raising in order to reduce incidences of abuse, case management and follow ups of abuse survivors who come through the organisation or through referrals.
* **Girls Empowerment and Advocacy** department has a mandate of empowering our girls on their social and economic rights as well as Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights (SRHR) and capacity building on all key aspects that are relevant for them to demand their rights so as to advocate for gender sensitive laws and policies.
* **Community Development and Empowerment Centres** department focuses on enhancing social development through community engagements and platform building such as Men and Boys Forum and Community Development Committees (CDCs) which enhance the programs we hold as well as monitoring economic empowerment projects vis a vis Empowerment Centres in Murewa and Seke.

**PROJECT BACKGROUND**

In the quest to provide gender responsive and transformative services that seek to solve GBV, abuse, early pregnancies, forced marriage and child marriage problems at grass root levels, Shamwari Yemwanasikana (SYS) have established a One Stop Empowerment Centre in Murehwa which seeks to be a safe haven for girls in distress. The realization that GBV and child abuse comes with devastating effects on the physical and psychological wellbeing of a child prompted SYS to come up with an idea of having a safe shelter where survivors of abuse can heal from the effects of abuse at the same time going through various stages of empowerment. SYS envisions a society where girls are safe, empowered and free to participate in their social, economic and political development without any impediment. It is against this background that SYS seeks to extend the idea to Seke rural community as well as strengthening the already existing One Stop Empowerment Centre in Murehwa. The organization believes in being an exclusive friend to the girl child hence the need to create an enabling environment for the survivors in form of empowerment centres to cater for every need that victims and survivors of GBV and abuse could have at the same time providing a safe space to heal and recover from the psychological torture endured as a result of GBV and abuse.

**About Child abuse in Zimbabwe**

There has been an alarming increase in the number of reported cases of sexual abuse in Zimbabwe with the Zimbabwe Republic Police reporting that more than 100 girls are sexually abuse every day**.[[2]](#footnote-2)** Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Violence Against Women (CEDAW) defines a child as any boy or **GIRL** under the age of 18. While the Convention on the Rights of the Child defines a child as a person below the age of 18. The Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No.20) Act 2013 Section 81 (1) states that every boy or a **GIRL** under the age of 18 years is a child. On the other hand, child abuse is mistreatment by an adult of a child or young person that harms or endangers that child or young person’s physical or emotional health, development or wellbeing.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Child abuse has completely devastating effects on the victims of abuse.[[4]](#footnote-4) They often feel distresses and may display a wide range of psychological problems which in most cases affects their wellbeing. They tend to feel powerless, ashamed and distrustful of others with some even ending up running away from their home in the event that the perpetrator is part of the family. In such cases child abuse is often hidden away thereby making the victim more vulnerable. In some instances child abuse survivors suffer from school dropout which reduces their capacity to advance with education which translates to economic dependency on males and other relations which recreates cycle of poverty.

According to the National Baseline Survey on Life Experiences of Adolescents, a study conducted by ZIMSTATS looking at the experiences of young people and children with violence including sexual violence, they found that there is growing evidence of an association between violence, especially sexual violence, and HIV and AIDS, forced or coerced sex may lead to HIV transmission, violence and threats of violence may inhibit a person’s ability to negotiate safe sex behaviors, sexual violence experienced as a child may lead to increase risk-taking behaviors later in life. It is clear therefore that child abuse is harmful and in most cases it leaves ripple effects on the wellbeing of the child. Hence the need to create safe space for child abuse victims where they can get hope in various hopeless situations.

**PROJECT JUSTIFICATION**

**“The worrisome thing is that according to our statistics, 60% of these cases are perpetrated by people known to the survivors. Most of these incidents are happening in our homes which have always been perceived to be safe havens for our children,”**

*Remarks by the Chief magistate Mishrod Guvamombe, Extract from the Newsday dated November 2 2017,*

Because many child abuse victims are threatened with homelessness, and many other socio- economic problems, safe shelter is critical for abuse victims. It should be noted that most abuse cases are perpetrated by the closest people to the victims, those who are supposed to protect them hence in order to guard against interference with evidence, there is need to provide safe shelter for such abuse victims so that they can be removed from abuse environment. In order to respond to the numerous effects of Child abuse, Shamwari Yemwanasikana has sought to establish a comprehensive One Stop Empowerment Center (OSEC) in Murehwa and Seke districts to cater for the emergency health, legal aid, psychosocial support, counselling, safe shelter, nutrition, relief and economic empowerment needs of girls and women who would have suffered abuse and GBV in these areas. SYS seeks to empower victims of GBV and abuse by providing comprehensive intervention services through one stop empowerment center services that encompass medical and police referrals as well as court escorts and legal expertise, counseling, psycho-social support services and a safe shelter that provides care and support for those fleeing physical and sexual abuse with additional vocational skills training facilities in response to economic empowerment for the victims to be self-reliant young girls and women and a resource center for easy access, use and dissemination of quality information on women’s rights, health and Sexual Reproductive Health Rights (SRHR). Successful establishment of the one stop empowerment centres will contribute towards achieving a gender sensitive environment for the comprehensive development of the girl child together with that of the community at large. The empowerment centres will have boarding facilities and other houses built which will provide safe shelter for the girls fleeing away from abuse, as well as staff and visitors houses that will cater for volunteers at the empowerment center. Through this proposed project, SYS seeks to improve the livelihoods of the survivors of abuse by setting up a vocational training initiatives where girls will go through training on sustainable livelihood skills such as dressmaking, cake making, hairdressing, plumbing, brick laying, pottery, weaving, basketry, market gardening among other skills that can be sustainable in achieving one’s total economic empowerment.

SYS also seek to increase information dissemination efforts by establishing an advocacy unit that will work as a resource center where girls and community members will freely access educational, legislative and informative materials that offer sexual and health reproduction, HIV and AIDS, gender equality, maintenance laws, national constitution, inheritance laws, domestic violence act, child rights articles, drugs and alcohol abuse, child prostitution, human trafficking among a host of other relevant advocacy areas. A counselling unit will be part of the center where victims will be provided with individual and group counselling sessions. The administration center will also house a dispensary unit where health checks and treatment will be conducted. A legislative unit will be established to cater for those who will be in need of legal aid and advice. A dining and kitchen block will be set up to cater for all the nutritional support for the residents and non- residents accessing counselling and heath care services.

**PROJECT TARGET AND IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY**

Shamwari Yemwanasikana will constructively use a diversified approach to guarantee the accomplishment of the objectives of the One Stop Empowerment Center (OSEC) project in Murehwa and Seke districts. SYS’s intervention strategy will cater for the emergency health examination and prevention against STIs and HIV transmission by ensuring the administration of Post Exposure Prophylaxis (PEP). The organization will also provide legal aid, psychosocial support, counselling, economic empowerment and above all safe shelter with an enabling environment for complete healing from the consequences of abuse.

**References**

Child protection from violence, exploitation and abuse - http://www.unicef.org/protection/57929\_58008.html

Concern over spike in child abuse cases- <https://www.newsday.co.zw/2017/11/concern-spike-child-abuse-cases/>

G. Feltoe, Strengthening Our Law on Child Sexual Abuse, 2017

Hidden in plain Sight: Child Sexual abuse in Zimbabwe- https://www.unicef.org/zimbabwe/resource\_15420.html

https://www.communities.qld.gov.au/childsafety/protecting-children/what-child-abuse

1. Exclusive friend of the girl Child [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Hidden in plain sight: Child Sexual Abuse in Zimbabwe- https://www.unicef.org/zimbabwe/resource\_15420.html [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.communities.qld.gov.au/childsafety/protecting-children/what-child-abuse [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. G. Feltoe, Strengthening Our Law On Sexual Abuse, 2017 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)