

SUMMARY OF PROJECT DOCUMENT

FOR

**CHIPO CHEDU TRUST FOR CHILDLESS
WOMEN IN ZIMBABWE**

BACKGROUND

Chipo Chedu is an independent advocacy and lobbying non-governmental organisation dedicated to shifting of public opinion and attitude towards childless women and issues relating to infertility in Zimbabwe. It places a strong focus on the protection and support of childless women who are emotionally, psychologically and economically abused due to their failure to conceive and bear a child. It is the brainchild on Betty Chishava, a married and childless woman. After she had been in a childless marriage for 26 years in 1995, during which she was endlessly ridiculed and abused, Betty thought it was time to do something. She seriously pondered over her experiences and wondered how many others were in similar situations, how many others suffered the curse of African tradition that shuns childlessness.

A year later she teamed up with three other women who were facing similar problems and started organising meetings to ascertain the magnitude of the problem. They conducted a survey and coupled with available data, established that at least five percent of Zimbabwean women were infertile or had failed to fall pregnant in a heterosexual relationship.

The women then went around to four of the country's 10 provinces to conduct a mini research to ascertain coping mechanisms of childless women in various parts of the country. In March 1997, the organisation also secured airtime on national radio to gather more information on the problems and possibly numbers of the childless in the country. There was an overwhelming response from childless women and in some cases couples. By year-end, a national meeting was convened of all the childless that had expressed interest in the organisation.

Among the meeting's findings was that society had accepted that married men had the right to have as many extra-marital relationships as they could afford in a bid to prove their fertility status. The meeting also found that in the event of the death of a male, the childless woman had no option but to return to their original home empty handed because tradition dictated that only widows with children had the right to inherit a husband's estate. All participants at the meeting said they needed to be counselled and be economically and socially empowered.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

PROBLEMS FACED BY CHILDLESS WOMEN

Some of the major problems faced by childless women are as follows:

- Stigma, ridicule and abuse from society, families and spouses. Being childless is regarded as a curse in the Zimbabwean society, and women are always on the receiving end because they are the ones who are expected to fall pregnant. They are called all sorts of names such as witches. Some are suspected to have been engaged in prostitution before they got married, others are accused of having aborted pregnancies before they were married resulting in their failure to conceive. Blame for childlessness is always laid on the women. They are ridiculed until death, where they are buried with a dead rat tied to their waistline.
- Men see it as their God-given right to openly have extra-marital affairs in search of children. Close families members literally condone the practice. Such practices, expose the childless married women to HIV and AIDS that is ravaging across the country with a prevalence rate one in every four adults.
- Childless women are not only harassed and abused by their spouses and in-laws, but also by their own relatives, parents and brothers and sisters who see them as a shame on their families because they fail to reproduce.
- Although there are inheritance laws favourable to women, usually at the death of a spouse, childless women are stripped of all their husband's wealth and possessions by the husband's relatives because of the belief that a woman can only inherit her marital belongings if she has bore a child in that relationship.

VISION

Chipo Chedu is committed to eradicating the stigma associated with being childlessness by making sure that society changes its attitude and behaviour towards the infertile. It aims at empowering the childless women in Zimbabwe to a level where she can challenge societal attitude towards them and be treated with respect and dignity.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The project's goals and objectives are as follows:

- To raise awareness of the problems faced by childless women in Zimbabwe
- To lobby and advocate for the recognition of childless women as any other human being in life,
- To change the behaviour of society towards childless women through public education programmes
- To address cultural norms and beliefs that mitigate against childless women as well as work towards society's behaviour change towards childless women promoting mutual knowledge and understanding and respect of those affected by infertility in the community.
- To provide counselling services to all women affected by infertility
- To facilitate scientific and social intervention measures aimed at reducing infertility levels among the childless, either through fertility treatment or adoption or fostering of orphans, or abandoned babies.
- To promote the economic, social, education and cultural wellbeing of all infertile women
- To reduce poverty among the childless by promoting income and self-sustenance projects

PLANNED ACTIVITIES IN SHORT TERM

- Publicity campaign through production of literature, flyers for remote rural areas, advertising and launch of a web site.
- Conduct a medical research with aid of medical school or ministry of health to ascertain scientific extent of the problem
- Launch organisation in remaining five of the eight provinces
- Secure a physical office from which to operate from
- Conduct workshops for decision makers to highlight the problems of childless women

ACHIEVEMENTS SO FAR

Working on voluntary basis, founding and other members of the Chipo Chedu have helped increase awareness of childlessness among the community through counselling not only of victims of infertility, but also the society in general. This has seen an increased acceptability of childless people.

Other childless people have started foster care, while some are adopting orphans and abandoned babies.

Many couples that had broken up are slowly getting back together having accepted their situation and with the support of now informed family members.