




# CASE STUDY FROM CHILDREN

By Patience Chiyangwa





**E**very evening her screams could be heard piercing through the solemn silence of the night until a neighbour could stomach it no more. A call came through 116, breaking the silence of abuse and violence. The cause of the ongoing crying and screaming was not fully known, but it was clear a young person was suffering and something needed to be done. Childline Zimbabwe recorded the neighbour's concerns, assured their confidentiality and anonymity, and proceeded to verify and follow-up on the child's welfare.

Rudo, 13 years old (not her real name) was a known young and energetic girl in her community. She was cheerful, loved school and was dreaming of becoming an engineer. She lived in Chikombedzi with her parents. Her 17 year old sister was a third wife of a 42 year old man. The sister died in October 2010 and traditionally her parents made a decision that Rudo would replace her sister and becoming wife to her babamukuru (sister's husband) in Rutenga. As per the norm, this was done without consultation or considering how Rudo felt. She had no other option but to pack her bags and go to fill in the gap left by her sister's death. Babamukuru's other two wives were based in the rural areas. At first it was exciting for Rudo, cherishing the change of environment but as a vulnerable child, not fully comprehending her predicament. She had been literally given away as a child bride (chimutsa mapfihwa) robbed of her childhood and stripped of many of her rights. Living alone with babamukuru was not an issue until he started making advances at her which got her thinking. Her continual rejection and confusion angered babamukuru who expected to easily woe her into his bed. One day he physically abused her for not putting his bicycle inside the house the very moment after he got home. She was beaten using an electric cable, which scarred and injured her body. That night babamukuru raped her marking

the beginning of many helpless, sleepless nights of crying. This constant crying was overheard by the neighbour, and it prompted a call to Childline's 116 toll-free confidential Helpline.

A social worker from Childline traveled to Rutenga to listen to, comfort, and counsel Rudo. It was during this follow-up that Childline became aware of the early forced child-marriage, which was marked by physical, sexual as well as emotional abuse. Babamukuru, in following with traditional practices was taking advantage of a vulnerable minor. On being asked why he was treating Rudo this way, all he could say was "Rudo ipfimbi yangu" meaning Rudo is his wife. Babamukuru had also taken Rudo's sister as a child bride as per the culture of their faith and sadly history had repeated itself. This is the predicament of most girls in this faith.

The rights of a girl child are being infringed through this man-made oppressive church doctrine. Cases that we receive are unfortunately, only the tip of the iceberg. The plight of girls in similar circumstances out there calls for society to unite in corrective action to stop this abuse happening. More often than not, the HIV status of the men marrying child brides is unknown, becoming more questionable when their spouses die.

Rudo went through sessions of counselling until she told the social worker she wanted to get out of her situation. Childline assisted the Department of Social Services Probation Officer to visit Rudo and complete an assessment of the need to remove the child to a place of safety. Given the daily abuse that Rudo was subjected to, it was clear that she would not be safe if she was to remain living with Babamukuru, and she too would eventually die as her sister did. It was at this point when the Department of Social Services chose to fulfill their mandate and placed Rudo in a suitable "place of safety". The first attempt to remove Rudo from Babamukuru was fruitless as he became loud and aggressive; refusing to allow his young bride to be removed away from him, but wanted to keep her and continue

to abuse her as he felt that was his right and duty as her husband. Another visit was made accompanied by a ZRP Officer from the Victim Friendly Unit who arrested Babamukuru for rape of a minor while Rudo was taken to a children's home. This was a difficult process, but by adopting a multi-sectoral approach the various stakeholders were finally able to provide Rudo with the protection she deserved given the fact that it is a basic human right to be kept safe from harm, abuse and violence.

Childline made visits to Chikombedzi providing counseling to Rudo's parents. Rudo's parents realized how it was detrimental to marry off young girls. They were particularly sorry that they had already lost their eldest daughter. They were grateful to Childline as Rudo was fortunate to get a new lease of life. They gladly took back Rudo and welcomed her into their home again with much jubilation and understanding of children's rights.

Childline Zimbabwe has identified a school near her village which she was enrolled. Babamukuru received a one and a half year jail sentence, and within a month behind bars his health deteriorated and passed on.

Sadly, Rudo's health began taking a toll on her, with persistent chest pains and incessant coughing. Childline spoke to Rudo's parents who eventually agreed to have Rudo tested for HIV. As if Rudo had not suffered enough by being abused by Babamukuru she is now living positively and on Anti-Retro-Therapy. With the support of her family she is coming to terms with her cstaous. Rudo is a strong young girl and is determined to overcome the trauma she has suffered and its life-lasting impact on her health. Sadly help did not get to her soon enough but her family's experience is the talk of their village. This will assist in saving girls of her religion from being child brides. Childline engaged the traditional leadership and an awareness campaign was held in the village, marking a new era, new hope for child protection in Chikombedzi. ■

# E ZIMBABWE