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Clean Girl Soap Seeks to Deter Child Marriage in Zimbabwe



Labeling Clean Girl soap in Harare.

Most days of the week Shylin, 14, looks after her father, who is paralyzed from an accident, and sells charcoal in the market. But when The Advocacy Project met her last week in Harare, Shylin was absorbed in pouring thick, gooey green soap into bottles that carried the enticing label of "Clean Girl."

Shylin is one of sixty girls who participate in an ambitious startup run by [Women Advocacy Project](#) (WAP), a Harare-based group that helps girls to avoid early marriage.



Shylin, 14, seeks refuge in soap.

One third of all girls in Zimbabwe are thought to marry before the legal age of 18, and one reason is a brutal economic crisis. Gas lines stretch for over a mile. Electricity is available for just 6 hours a day. Zimbabwean currency has fallen 50% against the dollar in 4 months. The price of food has soared.

This falls most heavily on families in underserved communities, like Epworth and Chitungwiza, where WAP works. Shylin was forced to leave school last year because her family could not afford school

fees, which can run to \$40 a term. This is far beyond the means of families which earn less than 15 Zimbabwe bonds (\$1) a day, as many do.

In the face of such pressure poor families can be tempted to marry their daughters off to an older and richer man. But this usually ends up badly, says Constance Mugari, the founder of WAP: "When a girl gives birth it can lead to serious medical problems, particularly if she is forced to work hard in the house."



Trish's square for *The Zimbabwe Child Marriage Quilt* shows schoolgirls being enticed into prostitution.

The connection between poverty and child marriage has been graphically depicted in *The Zimbabwe Child Marriage Quilt*, which was exhibited for the first time by Ms Mugari at the recent [UN Summit on women and girls \(ICPD25\)](#) in Nairobi.

The squares were sewn by girls in the WAP program and show girls in extreme distress. One family was persuaded to marry their daughter into a polygamous family by the local church. Another girl, an orphan, was sold into marriage by her guardian. A third square shows a girl being given to an older man as compensation for a wrong committed by her family - a Shona practice known as *kuripa ngozi*.

WAP has responded by selecting two strong-minded girls to serve as "ambassadors against child marriage," mobilize girls and supervise the soap-making in Epworth and Chitungwiza. Trish Manganhiwa, 19 (photo), the ambassador in Epworth, has sold many more bottles of soap than her team members but wants all profits to be shared equally.



Constance Mugari founded WAP, cares for girls. WAP had no prior experience of soap before launching the project, but Ms Mugari realized that demand for cleaning material is high in poor communities and that liquid soap is relatively easy to make.

[McLane Harrington](#), an AP Peace Fellow from the Fletcher School who volunteered at WAP this past summer, worked with the two girl ambassadors, designed Clean Girl labels and raised over \$3,000 through Global Giving for the startup.

The results are encouraging. In three months, the two teams have made \$878 from soap sales. This will be shared between the girls, bringing some respite to their families.

WAP has also found that making and selling soap builds teamwork and confidence. Asked how she felt when strangers purchased her soap, Shylin replied simply: "I love it."

WAP's program has been generously supported by the [Rockflower Foundation](#) and [Action for World Solidarity](#) in Berlin.

* Read the blogs of Peace Fellows [McLane](#) (2019), and [Alex](#) (2018)

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