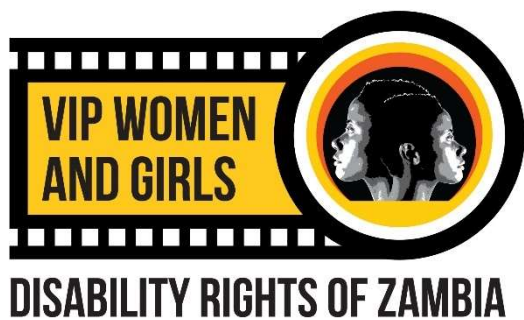


# PROJECT REPORT

## Ending early pregnancies and child marriage in Livingstone



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**Funded by:**

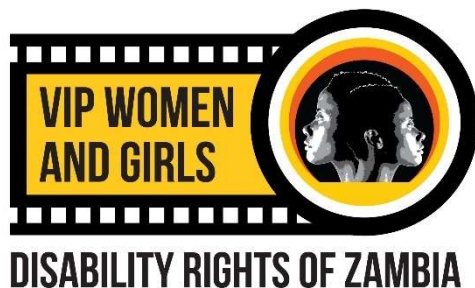


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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is the product of a 6-week project conducted in Livingstone, Zambia, between 3<sup>rd</sup> July to 12<sup>th</sup> August 2023. The purpose of the project was to identify ways in which interventions and measures to prevent teen pregnancies and child marriage can be enhanced to achieve a greater impact.



It was conducted under the supervision of two local NGOs – Sport in Action Zambia and Vilole Images Productions – both of which administer programmes to protect and advance women’s and children’s rights. Likewise, the recommendations and proposals set out as a result of this project have been made with a focus on what SiA and VIP can deliver and achieve within their existing and future plans of work.

In particular, this project has focused on SiA’s ‘*Girls in Action*’ programme, which educates girls and young women at school on essential topics including healthcare and human rights, and VIP’s ‘*Shungu Namutitima*’ Human Rights Film Festival, which relaunched in 2023 to provide a space for the cultural and artistic promotion of human rights, including those of women and girls, with a particular focus on people with disabilities.

In summary, the proposals made as a result of this project are to widen awareness and responsibility for preventing early pregnancy and child marriage beyond girls and young women, on whom interventions are currently mostly focused. Instead, SiA and VIP, working alongside their key partners and agencies, should adjust

and revise their work in the area to target boys and young men, parents and local community leaders (including church leaders and ward chairmen) for sensitisation to the harm caused by teen pregnancy, and the responsibility that they each share for reducing occurrence alongside the young women themselves.



## INTRODUCTION

Teenage pregnancy remains a key national issue in Zambia, including in Southern Province where Livingstone is located.

Background characteristic	Year					
	1992	1996	2002	2007	2014	2018
<b>Age</b>						
15	5.3	4.5	4.5	5.8	4.9	6.4
16	14.7	15.3	15.0	16.2	11.9	15.1
17	29.9	28.3	33.8	28.7	25.7	30.0
18	54.3	46.1	44.2	41.0	41.7	41.9
19	65.6	59.4	56.9	54.6	58.9	52.9
<b>Residence</b>						
Urban	28.5	26.6	27.1	20.4	20.0	19.3
Rural	40.0	34.4	34.9	35.0	36.4	37.0
<b>Province</b>						
Central	39.8	32.3	32.3	29.3	29.9	30.6
Copperbelt	28.0	29.9	26.4	20.1	16.3	21.0
Eastern	43.7	35.0	35.4	29.7	35.4	39.5
Luapula	36.1	22.6	36.5	32.1	27.9	29.0
Lusaka	30.5	28.6	28.9	20.8	23.8	14.9
Muchinga	-	-	-	-	29.6	29.3
Northern	36.7	31.4	30.6	26.6	30.0	25.9
North Western	31.9	38.0	33.3	37.3	41.0	35.7
Southern	34.4	33.5	31.9	35.9	36.0	42.5
Western	36.4	32.7	39.7	43.6	40.4	41.2
<b>Education</b>						
None	45.4	48.1	45.6	54.3	53.2	41.9
Primary	36.5	33.1	35.7	32.9	35.9	36.3
Secondary	21.2	21.1	21.4	20.8	23.1	22.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>33.8</b>	<b>30.7</b>	<b>31.6</b>	<b>27.9</b>	<b>28.5</b>	<b>29.2</b>

Source: ZDHS 1992–2018

The above table (taken from Malunga, G., Sangong, S., Saah, F.I. et al. *Prevalence and factors associated with adolescent pregnancies in Zambia: a systematic review from 2000–2022*, *Arch Public Health* 81, 27 (2023) <<https://doi.org/10.1186/s13690-023-01045-y>>) shows that as of 2018, Southern Province suffers from one of the highest rates of teenage pregnancy within Zambia. It also depicts the correlation of higher rates of education with lower rates of teenage pregnancy.

The harmful effects of teenage pregnancy are likewise well-documented – carrying a baby whilst the body is still developing during puberty entails serious risks to the permanent health and wellbeing of the young mother, up to and including death. In cases where the child is still at school, it further involves inevitable

disruption to education and personal development, including at a minimum several months of minimised academic work and maternity leave before, during and after the pregnancy. Most significantly, teenage pregnancy (and in several cases, child marriage) represents a severe violation of a young person's essential human rights, as a woman and as a child (and, where applicable, as a person with disabilities), given that children cannot consent to sexual activity, and because very often they do not have the sufficient knowledge or maturity to make adequately informed and carefully considered decisions with life-changing consequences for their personal advancement and wellbeing.

The aim of this project was not to add to the already extensive and broad range of academic or statistical research on teenage pregnancy (including within Zambia itself), but rather to gather information for the purpose of designing interventions which can achieve a higher rate of reduction. In the first instance, these recommendations can and should be implemented in Livingstone, where the project work and information gathering exercises were conducted. However, it is also hoped that the perspectives and suggestions offered by this report can develop the potential to be applied elsewhere within comparable urban areas in Zambia, once the efficacy of any suggestions made in this report can be measured upon implementation.

## PROJECT WORK

The six weeks I spent in Livingstone were primarily focused on conducting fieldwork. This entailed placements within Livingstone Central Hospital, at the maternity and abortion wards alongside the Gender Based Violence Clinic, at schools including David Livingstone Secondary School and Holy Cross Primary and Secondary School, and at the Livingstone branch of Sport in Action itself.

The individuals I spoke to included guidance teachers, nurses, therapists, a paralegal, volunteers and young people, including those with lived experience of early pregnancy and child marriage – although those conversations were translated and mediated through the healthcare and educational professionals who had direct responsibility for their safety and welfare, including in obtaining consent for the interviews. The conversations were mainly one-to-one, however one of the most productive sources of information was a facilitated group discussion with some Sport-in-Action volunteers who implement the Girls in Action programme in local schools.





I have also had the benefit of reviewing Sport in Action's handbook for the Girls in Action programme, as well as **a qualitative assessment report produced for Sport in Action in 2016**, which examined how the organisation should respond to the related issue of HIV and AIDS transmission. That report made 6 key recommendations specifically focused on reducing teenage pregnancies:

1. Link out-of-school unemployed youths to skills training.
  - a. Explore other innovative approaches to help parents to alleviate poverty that will not require high financial injections such as savings and internal lending groups.
2. Develop an advocacy component to ensure that young people, especially boys remain in school.
3. Address harmful traditional practices, by working with community volunteers to raise awareness levels on the dangers of early marriages.
  - a. Target awareness activities at traditional leaders, church leaders, 'Alangizi' and ordinary community members.
  - b. Form community based child protection groups, which must also be used as conduits of positive change.
4. Train all teachers to ensure that the flow of awareness creation and knowledge on early pregnancies and child marriage is sustained.
  - a. Include refresher training for trained teachers as well as orientation new teachers.
5. Advocate for a thorough review of the existing school curricula and for the inclusion of missing information on comprehensive sexuality education and other aspects where there are gaps.
6. Emphasize fostering communication between parents/guardians and their children/dependents through training and sensitization of both parents and children as well

as working through community and religious leaders as conduits of influence for the community.

An important context for the report itself and the years between its completion and the work of this project is the advent of the coronavirus pandemic, which had a drastic impact on the ability of NGOs like Sport in Action and Vilole Images Production to continue their planned operations as normal, as well as the availability and security of the necessary funding. But given the extent to which much of the recommendations of 2016 have yet to be implemented, it should hopefully come as little surprise that much, if not most, of this project's findings will serve to reiterate and reemphasize the findings and recommended interventions that were first proposed 7 years ago.

## **FINDINGS**

My conversations with 14 young women who were undergoing or had undergone early pregnancy, held in schools and clinics, provided a varied yet consistently bleak picture of its consequences. There were only two cases of planned pregnancy – and in both instances were the product of marriage (although one individual was 18 years old and thus an adult at the time of marriage) – virtually all other cases were unplanned and as a result of unprotected sexual activity within relationships with older boys or men, although the specific circumstances (including whether there was sexual abuse or violence) were not established from the conversations.

The themes that were consistently raised were:

- Concern over disruption to education
- Social shame and stigma associated with early pregnancy
- Physical pain and medical risks

Many of the young women had already received significant education on contraception and family planning from teachers and parents prior to having unprotected sex. Although a number of them told me that they had come to believe in promoting abstinence as a result of their experience, it was also acknowledged by both volunteers, professionals and the women themselves that the promotion of abstinence (as has reflected prevailing policy) in itself has not been effective in preventing early pregnancies.

Nonetheless, the policy environment has undoubtedly shifted significantly since 2016 – the Children’s Code Act 2022 represents a major development in legislative and governmental policy towards children’s rights in Zambia, including the compulsory obligations of parents and government agencies to ensure a child’s attendance at school, and the protection of pregnant children from discrimination due to their pregnancy. During my own stay in Zambia, media coverage of the Hichilema administration’s implementation of the law has focused on the manufacturing of school desks to increase the capacity of classrooms – something that will undoubtedly be of

relevance to reducing teenage pregnancies, given the correlation between boys and girls not attending school and those involved in cases of early pregnancy.

Of further relevance is the government's policy of reintegrating girls who have undergone teenage pregnancy back into school to complete their secondary education (called the 're-entry' policy) – aside from mitigating the educational disruption to those directly impacted by a pregnancy, one woman who benefited directly from this policy told me that it gave her the opportunity to use her own lived experience to directly educate her younger peers on the reality of pregnancy at a young age, as a means of enhancing deterrence towards unprotected sex.

It is deeply regrettable that some private and faith schools have refused to abide by the government's re-entry policy (on the apparent grounds of preventing 'fornication'), when this deprives their own pupils of first-hand awareness of the effects of early pregnancy, as well as contravening their own legal obligations under the Child Code Act not to discriminate against young women and girls on account of their pregnancy status. Additionally it is entirely at odds with the Christian values of mercy and forgiveness, given that the primary aim and effect of institutions preventing the re-entry of girls with experience of pregnancy is to punish them for their experience of an already painful and traumatic process, which occurs very often against their own will.

The group discussion that I facilitated with the SiA volunteers raised the complex and challenging issue of the relationship between tribal custom and early pregnancy and child marriage. I was told that this primarily impacted rural communities (such as, for example, in Mukuni Village, which suffers a relatively high rate of early pregnancies) as opposed to urban youths in Livingstone itself, where poverty and deprivation are perceived as a greater incentive or compulsion for young women to enter a sexual relationship with a boy or man. I was told about the continuation in some areas of 'nkolola' (Tonga for 'initiation') – a process by which girls as young as 12 are groomed to conform to traditional expectations of what a

young wife should be able to offer her husband, including sexually. More commonly, I was told that there remains a substantial generational stigma surrounding the ability of parents to discuss sexual education directly with their children – a responsibility which I was told is often left to grandparents or more distant relatives or members of the community.

Yet a key finding of this project is that such generalisations have the potential to be misleading and should be avoided, particularly with regard to the role of traditional and tribal customs in relation to early pregnancy. During my stay in Livingstone, I became aware via a TV news report of successful interventions from traditional leaders in Chisamba District, Central Province, led by Chief Chamuka, in drastically driving down the rate of early pregnancies, via sensitisation programmes delivered through parents, volunteers and traditional leaders. Given the challenges that both the central government and local agencies (as well as even NGOs) face in implementing national or regional initiatives and programmes, local leaders, whether traditional elders in rural areas or ward chairmen in urban neighbourhoods should be viewed as part of the solution than as part of the problem if meaningful progress is to be made locally in bringing the number of cases down, as was the case in Chisamba District.

Both the SiA volunteers and one of the school guidance teachers with whom I spoke told me that they felt that the programmes inside school and under NGOs to reduce early pregnancy were too focused on educating girls, and that not enough was being done to educate boys or to constructively engage with or sensitise parents and families, particularly given their new responsibilities under the recent Child Code Act. I was advised by a paralegal at one of the clinics I visited that attempts at penal enforcement against parents who failed to ensure their children were attending school were often ineffective, and that inter-agency working between police, social welfare and DEBS is often disjointed and ineffective. SiA and VIP are both well-placed and well-connected NGOs to advocate and campaign for stronger local implementation of national policies,

particularly given the more recent availability of funding from the Constituency Development Funds, with a focus on ensuring that agencies can collaborate more effectively to reduce the number of children involved in early pregnancy who may fall off the radar of schools or local social workers, particularly given their vulnerability to exploitation.

## **RECOMMENDED PROPOSALS**

As previously entailed in my outline of the project work, a more comprehensive and extensive report on NGO intervention was produced for Sport in Action in 2016. The core finding of this project, conducted 7 years later in 2023, is not that its recommendations have been ineffective, but rather that its recommendations have not as of yet been effectively implemented.

This project has further found that with the advent of the Child Code Act 2022, the Constituency Development Fund and increased national and international awareness of early pregnancies in Zambia, the circumstances for both Sport in Action and Vilole Images Production to begin implementing changes and updates to their provision of services is arguably more conducive than in 2016, particularly now that the unforeseen operational disruption of the Coronavirus Pandemic has largely appeared to subside.

However, I also feel it would be helpful to frame my recommendations more specifically in relation to the existing programmes and initiatives at both organisations to enhance the prospects of successfully integrating and implementing my suggestions:

### **1. Sport in Action – Girls in Action**

- Consider developing and implementing a 'Boys in Action' programme and handbook alongside GiA, given the importance of educating boys on their shared responsibility to prevent teenage pregnancy and to promote women's rights, as well as promoting their own school attendance, mental wellbeing and taking precautions – boys are far better placed than girls to ensure that condoms are used during sex
- Expand the existing GiA programme to be inclusive of parents, and consider educating girls and their parents together so that intra-family stigma on discussing sex can be reduced, and important parental conversations with children on healthy relationships and sexual activity can be promoted

## **2. Vilole Images Production – Shungu Namutitima Film Festival**

- Use the festival to emphasize a wider variety of narratives and perspectives on early pregnancy beyond a girl's direct lived experience of her rights not being upheld – encourage storytelling to focus on how seemingly small actions by individual parents, teachers and boys and young men can have a life-changing impact on girls beyond what might be immediately visible
  - A good example might be to follow the narrative used in the play 'An Inspector Calls' by J. B. Priestly, where the suffering of a young woman is only revealed through the impact of the apparently trivial actions of one family – this could be adapted to examine the impact of members of the community in determining whether or not a girl becomes subject to early pregnancy

These recommendations are very much built upon, rather than portrayed as an alternative to, the recommendations which were made to Sport in Action in the assessment report in 2016. Some recommendations – particularly numbers 4 and 5 in improving teacher training and ensuring the school curriculum is kept up to date, do appear to have been effectively delivered, at least locally within Livingstone in the schools and communities that I visited. Yet recommendations 2, 3 and 6 appear to require further work, even though the existing Girls in Action programme offers the space and opportunity to begin delivering change in these areas.

Recommendation 1 – skills training and low-cost financial interventions aimed at parents to alleviate poverty – is also key, especially given the setting of urban poverty in Livingstone (with many cases originating from the Maramba and Ngwenya areas), but both SiA and VIP should consider carefully whether they are the best placed NGOs to implement this. If they are not, they should identify suitable organisations or agencies which are.

## **CONCLUSION**

The prevalence of early pregnancy in Livingstone, Southern Province and across Zambia and sub-Saharan Africa remains an intractably difficult and pressing concern in a world of increased awareness and demand for women's and children's rights to be respected and championed. The work undertaken for this project has offered a chastening reminder of the ongoing and pervasive impact of poverty and communal disempowerment upon global ambitions of gender equality in education and the workplace, an end to sexual exploitation and violence against women and children, and the elimination of child mortality.

Yet it has also explored the dangers of pursuing simplistic solutions based on partial narratives of the situation – limiting sexual education of adolescents to the promotion of abstinence simply does not work, traditional and tribal community leaders have actually been some of the most effective agents of change in driving down early pregnancies in their areas, and most importantly of all, any proposed or implemented solutions have to represent the specific needs of Zambian youths, taking into account, for example, the impact of a limited labour market upon young people's personal aspirations.

The recommendations of this project should thus be seen as a starting point, and an opportunity for further development and research, as opposed to a definitive solution. But fundamentally, this report argues that government agencies, NGOs like SiA and VIP and community and family leaders need to be more prepared to question their own thinking and to explore radical changes to prior approaches, whilst focused on which methods of intervention ultimately end up delivering the lowest incidence rates of early pregnancies. Above all, the greatest power to prevent a girl from becoming pregnant in her adolescence does not lie with her alone, but with her peers, family and community – it is now time for future interventions to start reflecting that.