lives of adolescent girls and young women across Zimbabwe can be hard and traumatic every day that can be made to feel powerless, feel worthless, unloved, and hopeless. Many of the challenges they face...
Written and produced by young women living with HIV from Zvandiri

We would like to thank this group of ‘Her Voice, Her Story’ advocates who have worked with such patience, sensitivity and determination in documenting these stories in such difficult times.

Amanda, Vimbai, Rutendo, Deirdre, Lorraine, Samantha, Maria, Thokozile, Pretty and Berita

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To protect the privacy of the story tellers all names have been changed.

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Introduction

The lives of adolescent girls and young women across Zimbabwe can be hard. They can face difficulties every day that affect their lives, they can be made to feel powerless, feel worthless, unloved, and hopeless. Many of the challenges are not new – young women have been facing these things for decades and they still have not been addressed—poverty, exploitation and abuse, limited access to education and health care, a lack of power over their own lives, HIV stigma and discrimination. What is new, is how these challenges have been made worse by the impacts of COVID-19 which has seen many young women isolated from support and less able to ask for help.

This is why we have put this booklet together, to tell these stories, and keep telling them in the hope that things will finally change.

Supported by the Her Voice Fund, a Global Fund initiative funded by ViiV Healthcare, Zvandiri has captured stories of young women living with HIV so that their voices are heard.

Ten young women from Zvandiri trained as story collectors for our project, ‘Her Voice, Her Story’, spent time with peers listening to their stories. Despite the many challenges of COVID-19, they found ways to meet, to share and to listen. The young women described being forced into early marriage, unintended pregnancy, rejection by families, HIV stigma as well as stories of resilience, determination, and hope. They have written these stories to highlight the difficulties and hardships affecting adolescent girls and young women and their struggles, their victories and their hope of a new future!

We want these stories to have an impact on those that are in the same situation, for them to hear and understand they are not alone. We want these stories to inspire, motivate, cultivate, and empower girls around the world and we want these stories to touch the people that can make the decisions that can change things.

Many of the challenges are not new – young women have been facing these things for decades and they still have not been addressed—poverty, exploitation and abuse, limited access to education and health care, a lack of power over their own lives, HIV stigma and discrimination.

Amanda, Deirdre and Vimbai.
When Kudzai finished writing her Ordinary Level exams, she started dating with the aim of finding a nice young man and getting married as soon as possible. She could no longer bear to stay in the abusive home she was in and marriage seemed to be her only way out.

Kudzai was born living with HIV, she lost her parents when she was young, and was sent to stay with her uncle and his family. As soon as she moved into the house the abuse started. Her uncle never liked her and began beating her daily. He regularly insulted her, shaming her in front of others by telling them about her HIV. He called her ‘disgusting’ and ‘dirty’ and told her to stay away from others in the family.

Kudzai soon found herself a steady boyfriend and arranged a meeting with her aunt to fulfil the customs around getting approval for them to live together. Happily, Kudzai’s aunt agreed and she moved into her boyfriend’s family house. She was relieved to be away from her family and things were finally looking up for Kudzai but it didn’t last. Her boyfriend’s family did not like her at all, they refused to give her food and made her sleep outside. Her boyfriend was powerless to change this as he was being supported by his family and couldn’t risk being rejected by them. Kudzai was sad and hurt and couldn’t see a way out of her misery. She soon lost interest in her health and stopped taking her medicines as she rarely had proper food and was scared the family may see her medication and know she was living with HIV. She knew if they found out she was living with HIV she would be sent away from the house. Kudzai began to feel weak and sick and soon discovered she was also pregnant. There was no joy in this discovery as her boyfriend’s parents used this as the final reason to send her far away from their son.

Kudzai had nowhere to go so called on Anesu the Community Adolescent Treatment Supporter (CATS) who had been supporting her with HIV medication. She had been avoiding Anesu missing meetings but now she was alone she called her to ask for help finding shelter. She
told Anesu how the family had rejected her and her unborn child. The parents told Kudzai that her boyfriend was already betrothed to a scythe—a goblin spirit—and could not take a wife.

Anesu counselled her to return to her aunt and uncle’s house but Kudzai told her that she could not return there as her uncle had pledged that he would chase both her and her aunt away if she ever came back.

Anesu referred Kudzai’s case to a Community Health Worker who supported her and linked her to child protection support services. She was taken to Musasa Project, where she was cared for and supported in her pregnancy and in the birth of her child. Once the child was 3 months old the team from Musasa accompanied Kudzai back to her aunt’s place and with patience and counselling her family agreed to take her back.

Kudzai worked hard to care for her child and to take her medication and received mental health support from a young mentor mother from Zvandiri. With time and perseverance she was back to herself. In recognition of her effort Kudzai was selected to become a Young Mentor Mother working to support other young mothers living with HIV facing similar challenges she had faced. Today she cares for her child and feels proud being a role model to other young mums and helping them see their way through the difficulties.

Berita
In 2004, Shingai’s mother passed away – her father had already passed away some years before. Still grieving about her mother and trying to cope, Shingai moved to live with her paternal grandmother, Gogo. She hoped for a loving and caring environment, but things were very different. An additional mouth to feed added pressure to Gogo. She treated Shingai poorly, refusing her basic things like food to eat and soap to bath and she would be beaten every day for no reason.

Suffering hardships and abuse for years, aged 20 Shingai started going to bars, drinking beer and smoking to take away her troubles. She drew attention of men in the bars and it wasn’t long before they were offering money for sex with Shingai. In Mazowe, the mining men showed off their money and young women living in poverty, wanting a better life were vulnerable to their offers of American dollars.

Soon Shingai found out she was pregnant to one of her clients from the bar. She did not know his background or even remember his face. Shingai saw the pregnancy to term and it was during this time through the national Prevention of Mother-to-Child Transmission (PMTCT) program that Shingai was tested for HIV. The facility staff through their routine health assessments also identified her as at risk of having TB. She tested positive for both HIV and TB and began treatment. She gave birth to her baby and thanks to the PMTCT programme the child was born HIV free.

Shingai was linked to a Community Adolescent Treatment Supporter (CATS) at Zvandiri and she has supported Shingai with her HIV treatment. COVID has brought new challenges as the face-to-face meetings have stopped and Shingai misses the support group, but she continues to get regular support from her CATS over the phone, and she is hoping that home visits will start again soon. Shingai is no longer selling sex and is focusing on raising her child. She continues to receive her HIV and TB treatment and is doing well.

Rutendo
At least way back one could look for ways to hustle, at least there were options. How do I survive now, how do we survive?

I am now between a rock and a hard place - I am heartbroken, I am hopeless, I am powerless, broken with no end in sight.

My name is Trinity, and I am 14 years old. I live with both my parents in a rural area far from the city and I have been living with HIV all my life.

We used to live a normal life then COVID-19 came and changed everything. The money began to run out and we could hardly get food. We now manage with one meal a day which I am grateful for because I know some people can’t even manage that.

As the months of the pandemic have gone, on my clothes have become ragged and dirty but I just have to manage. The thing that really hurts me is what I have to do when it is that time of the month! Sanitary pads are so expensive and my mum can no longer afford to buy me them. I know she feels sorry for me but there is nothing she can do. She has shown me how girls managed in the old days using cow dung as a pad. I feel dirty using it, but I have no other option. I also worry that using cow dung for a long stretch of time might affect my health, I am scared and I do not know what will happen. I am praying it will be ok as who am I kidding? With the COVID situation this remains my only option. At least I can get food and I have shelter over my head, this is what’s important. This place is so isolated I feel so vulnerable as social services are far away from here and I know I am not the only one. So many girls are struggling due to lack of money but who is really thinking of us?

Samantha
Upon meeting Evelyn for the first time to document her story, she has a cheerful personality, and is as she likes to call herself “a young and empowered mother of one.” She is 23 years old now and spends most of her time selling fruits and vegetables at a local market in Marondera, a city in Mashonaland East. She says that she is content with her life and looking after her baby. But life was not always like that for her 3 years back.

Evelyn and Bruce met in Mutoko, a town located 143 kms from Harare, when Evelyn left her sister’s place in search of work after failing her ordinary level exams. Bruce was very caring and loving towards her and not long after they met, they married and they were happy.

When Evelyn turned 20, she found out she was pregnant, and she registered with her local clinic. Evelyn found out that she was living with HIV the day she went for her first ANC booking. According to her, she was shocked by this result because she had tested negative many times before and had been constantly accessing HIV testing services. Dealing with such news as an expectant mother was hard for her and she immediately went home to get support and an explanation from Bruce. But all she got were accusations of extra marital affairs and suggestions she had brought the virus into their home. Bruce informed her that she was the one with the problem as he explained “I got another girl pregnant so if it was me then why is she not HIV positive also.” Evelyn didn’t know what to do but to keep quiet and take her medication. But ever since that day things changed for the worse with her husband coming home drunk and beating up Evelyn even though she was pregnant.

Evelyn was afraid to report the matter to the police, she continuously received threats from Bruce which would be accompanied by blame that she infected him with the virus. Day after day it went on and she just learnt to cope with the ill treatment. Despite his threats Evelyn never stopped encouraging her husband to get an HIV test but he would always refuse and then would force Evelyn to have unprotected sex.

One day Bruce told Evelyn that he had sought help from one of the apostolic sects. He had been told HIV was just a demon needing exorcism from Evelyn’s body and part of this exorcism required for her to stop taking her antiretroviral medicines and focus on attending prayer sessions. She knew this wasn’t right for her and tried to voice her opinions but as always it fell on deaf ears – he did not want to hear what she had to say. Afraid of the effects of not adhering to her
medication and the fear of transmitting the virus to her unborn baby, Evelyn ran away from home and went back to her sister, informing her of her ordeal. Her sister took her to the nearest clinic to replace the medication she had left at her husband’s home.

It was there that she got to meet with Silvia, a Community Adolescent Treatment Supporter (CATS). They were the same age and had similar experiences and Evelyn felt able to share her whole story with Silvia. Silvia referred her to the primary counselor for counseling and support in dealing with what she went through, a nurse at the facility for her health needs and the social workers where she got legal advice. Evelyn gave birth to a healthy baby boy who turned three this year. She is now actively engaged in the young mother’s support group where she uses her story to encourage young women not to be silenced and be vocal for what they believe in.

Pretty
The role of a mother in the life of her child is to nurture and love a child. A mother’s physical and emotional presence provides babies with protection from stress which is so important for healthy development and the child’s future well-being.

However ideal that sounds, this is not what happened to Netsayi. She is 22 and lives with her younger brother and her mother. Life was not that easy after the death of Netsayi’s father. She went back to school but it was meaningless because she did not have books and pencils she needed and when she asked her mother to buy some, she was told to use the old books used by her brother.

To add to her issues, Netsayi suffered an eye infection and went to see an eye specialist but apparently there was nothing he could do and she lost the sight in one of her eyes.

The relationship with her mother was never good, she was treated horribly. Netsayi would do all the house chores hoping to make her mother happy but she would just shout at her for no reason. If Netsayi got sick her mother did nothing and Netsayi would just suffer through it quietly and heal.

She quit school, not because there was no money for her education but because it was so difficult for her to excel at school without books, or warm clothes in winter. Every month her father’s pension payslip would come but she never received anything.

“I sometimes feel like an outsider as my mother and younger brother treat me like I am not sitting amongst them, and talk to each other and it all makes me ask, is it because I am positive? But I was born with it, what am I supposed to do for my mother and brother to love and accept me? Can someone please tell me the sin I committed against my mother so I can ask for forgiveness? Is something wrong with me that my own mother hates me?”

There were days when Netsayi felt like giving up and taking her own life, there didn’t seem to be any reason to be alive.

The only thing that mattered to Netsayi was the support from Zvandiri and attending support groups with other young people where she could make friends, have fun and forget her troubles.

But what happens now with COVID and being forced to be at home, where will she get that breather?

Lorraine
Anna has lived with HIV all her life. Living with her parents she grew up in poverty with the family surviving on the little they had. Whilst at secondary school Anna began to think about the person she wanted to be and the image she wanted other people to see of her. With hopes of a new lifestyle, she started keeping company with a new group of friends who pressured her to follow their lifestyle. Anna started dating a man who was 12 years older than her, she was only 15.

“All I wanted from him was money.” Anna agreed to a relationship with the man to get the things her parents could not give her. But a few months after Anna received the money he came asking for his own ‘payment’. He told her that sex was not a big favour to ask after all the money he had given her.

Anna had not told him she was living with HIV and so with the aim of protecting them both she started to discuss having safe sex and using condoms but he flatly refused. Anna gave in to his pressure and had unprotected sex with him for a while before she discovered she was pregnant.

Anna told the news of her pregnancy to her boyfriend hoping he might be happy but he rejected her and refused to take any responsibility for the pregnancy. Anna ended up dropping out of school and had to rely on her family to look after her and the baby.

Anna looks back on those people she called friends who have deserted her. Anna feels worried and hopeless about her future but is receiving peer support from her clinic, which has given her a chance to connect with her peers and work through the challenges she faces in her new life as a young mother.

Deirdre
Life is hard. It’s even harder when your parents die from the virus HIV and infect you too. Now add being a girl living with a stepmother to that equation. That’s when you will realize, life indeed is hard!

Life was blissful enough growing up. After all, ignorance is bliss. I never understood why I was pampered, or my health taken utmost care of. A simple cold would send my father running all over and my mother to sit by my bedside all night. I just thought the pampering were benefits of being the last born.

It was only when I was 10 years old that the pieces started falling into place, even though they still puzzled me. It was then that my parents disclosed their HIV status to me and suggested the possibility that I too could be living with HIV. I just brushed it off; I was young, carefree and never once thought that yes I too could be infected.

Soon after I lost my mother, my father remarried. My stepmother never liked me but my father still showed me the love and care he always had.

Ten years later reality came knocking on my door. During a routine check-up, an HIV test was suggested, and I gladly welcomed it. What had I to fear? I was just 21, not yet sexually active, not using drugs so where would the virus come from? When the results came back positive, that’s when all hell broke loose. Memories of that bedside conversation with my parents all those years ago raced around my head. So, it had been true, I too was living with HIV.

The sheer level of disbelief struck me down. I could not stop crying, longing for my parents to still be there to comfort me.

Relations with my stepmother had become strained ever since my father passed away and now they just got even worse. I had only read about the stigma and discrimination toward people living with HIV. I had never thought I would experience it too. My stepmother was delighted, filled with utmost joy that I had tested positive. She had always hated how my father had pampered me and now felt this was payback time. I will never forget the words she uttered in my ears as I was crying over my positive result, “Makugwara zve? Zvino unoti uchapepwa nani? Waivhaira zve na baba vako zvino varipi?” “You are now sick? Who will take care of you now? You used to be a showoff when your father was around, now where is he?”
She did not stop there but went ahead and disclosed my status to her friends saying, “Anogwara zve uyu” ‘ She is in unhealthy.’ She would laugh and make fun of me as if she did not know how I had got infected and suggest it was as a result of prostitution.

When I needed food to take my medication, my stepmother would lock it all up and deny me food when I needed it the most. I lost weight and fell into deep depression from the sheer level of stigma my stepmother showed me.

I lost all hope in life and even lost my hope in love. I had met a guy I liked but my stepmother went behind my back and told him I was living with HIV without my knowledge. The embarrassment I felt was so immense. I felt like creeping under a rock and never coming out. I feared ever going into the dating arena again to suffer the same disclosure of my status and the stigma which would result.

The fear got even worse when one of my stepmother’s friend actually mocked me as I walked in the street that I was nothing but a sickly girl “murwere” she shouted with contempt as I passed.

The incident struck me and hurt me. I hated how I was stigmatized because of my status. I did not want it to keep happening and I wished for justice. No one has the right to disclose my status without my consent like that, I thought.

I am not sure where I found the bravery, but I reported the matter to the police hoping that they would help me, but it was all in vain. They did not take my situation, my feelings or my rights seriously and even made fun of me too.

And so, I walked every day holding my head high but being splashed with stigma all the way.

As I looked around me this was not just happening to me. Young girls living with HIV in my area were failing to reach the milestones they should be reaching because of the stigma all around. They are settling for less, delving into abusive relationships because they are told “you are even lucky I am dating you”.

I have told my story because I want this to end. Let’s end stigma and discrimination. Let’s not take advantage of girls living with HIV by thinking they are nothing but loose girls to be slept with and discarded. Let’s raise the banner high. Living with HIV is not a disability. Let’s end this discrimination because this is ME. Love me all or leave me all.

ndoZVANDIRI

Amanda
“I am just staying with this man because I have nowhere else to go but this life is hard.” These were the exact words of Tanya, an 18-year-old young mom. She like most other girls in the community, had to settle for early marriage due to the social and economic situation in our country. Holding back the tears and showing the pain that she had been trying to conceal Tanya tells her story on how she ended up married to an older man at just 16.

Tanya was the only child born with HIV in a family of five children and she lost her mother at a very young age. Life was never easy for her as she faced stigma from her stepmother and stepbrothers and sisters and at the age of 12 she had to drop out of school because her stepmother said they couldn’t afford to pay for school anymore. Her father was often drunk and rarely at home, so she had no one to talk to about what was happening. With nothing to keep her busy, Tanya got in the company of bad friends which made her stepmother chase her away from home. She had to move from one relative to another looking for shelter, never having anyone who would stand up for her even though they knew the conditions she was living under. So, it did not surprise her when there was no one left to take care of her.

Desperate, Tanya made a heartbreaking decision at the age of 16 to sell sex to survive. Tanya had so little knowledge about sex and the risks she was taking, and she soon discovered she was pregnant to a married older man. Filled with fear, Tanya believed it would be better to die but she could not harm the innocent life growing inside her. She had no choice but to move in with the man since she could not work anymore with the pregnancy. To her she thought that maybe things would get better when she gave birth to a baby girl but up until now she’s still living with the man and not one of her relatives has tried to contact her. Each day she faces threats from the husband’s first wife and she and the baby often go hungry.

The glimmer of hope in Tanya’s life today is the peer support from the CATS and young mentor mothers’ program. The support while she was pregnant has helped her psychologically and in making sure that she adheres to her medication and continuing to receive family planning.

She values the time at the clinic when she gets to meet up with her peers. “It makes me forget my problems and to know that I have people with good intentions for me and my child, it gives me hope”.

Vimbai
Why me?

“I became deaf and dumb not because I wasn’t able to talk or hear but because I isolated myself from people who would not accept my status”. Maria was 15 when she found out she was living with HIV and with this diagnosis came that question – why me? In a family of six, why was she the only sibling who was living with HIV? The confusion and stress left Maria doubting the purpose of her medication and refusing to take it.

During this time Maria would visit the clinic to collect her antiretroviral medication but as soon as she arrived home, she would empty the medicines into the toilet. It wasn’t long before her viral load results showed over 10,000 copies but she decided to keep this information from her family. AIDS-related deaths remain a leading cause of death among young women aged 15 to 24 years in Africa. Many of these deaths are among adolescents who acquired HIV as babies and lived into their teenage years before problems occurred. Many do not survive because they slip out of care – like Maria, not really ever understanding her diagnosis or treatment or there are those who just don’t respond successfully to HIV treatment.

In February 2017, Maria interacted with a group of young people who visited her at home to provide youth-friendly support. From these interactions, and further support, Maria ultimately became part of the Community Adolescent Treatment Supporters (CATS) program. But she was still defaulting on her treatment and she again did not tell anyone. She got another viral load test in May 2017 and the results were much higher than her first result – 38,592 copies. She finally realised the gravity of the situation and decided to approach her supervisor and tell the truth. After their session, the Zvandiri Mentor and CATS provided regular counselling sessions, monitoring adherence through phone call and text reminders. By the time September came, Maria’s viral load had been suppressed to an undetectable level. Having this support motivated Maria to go extra lengths in providing quality care and support to her peers living with HIV.

Maria
She wonders why she is here.

‘I tell her it’s because she can make a difference.

It is her story, her voice, which will bring about change!

On a Sunday afternoon at Insiza District, Theresa has just finished telling me her take on her life and her journey in search of her identity, meaning and purpose.

‘Sometimes we break down before we reach our goal.’ she says

Theresa was born with HIV, in a family of six, she was the second born and the only one who was living with HIV. When she found out what was happening to her, it was after months of sickness, going in and out of hospitals, never being well enough to play with others, or to attend a full term at school. She blamed herself, she felt like it was a curse, an embarrassment to her family. What made it worse was that she was a girl and was treated like this oh so fragile person who can break if not handled with care or someone who would die if not monitored twenty-four hours a day.

Theresa wanted to shout, ‘I am no different!’ She understood she was sick but that should not make people treat her any differently.

‘Yes, I am a girl, but I am strong, I am a fighter, perseverant, I am able – only if you give me a chance!’ Instead, I shut off those positive qualities you are not seeing in me because I have let you define who I am – a sickly and weak girl, not strong enough to endure. I retreat in my shell, there is no need for human connection since I am already written off as a dead girl breathing, I don’t matter, and nothing matters!

But she matters, everything about her matters.

Her voice should not be silenced in saying and standing up for what she wants.

In sickness and in health, whether HIV positive or negative, speak your truth because everything we do makes a difference, it impacts those around us, it either enlightens them or
makes them more ignorant. You would rather speak and stay in your truth than stay quiet and live according to their beliefs. That is a lot of responsibility – living according to someone else’s rules but what about your own rules, who will live them and remember you only live once.

Yes, she is in a battle with HIV, yes she will experience low days when she is under the weather, yes she will need you to assist her with her medicines, yes she is unsure of what her future holds. But she is living with HIV. She doesn’t want sympathy, or to be seen as powerless. She wonders why she is here. I tell her it’s because she can make a difference. It is her story, her voice, which will bring about change she needs!

Thokozile
For more information about the work of Zvandiri contact:

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