



## Zimbabwe – Researched and compiled by the Refugee Documentation Centre of Ireland on 19 July 2011

### Societal treatment of disabled people in Zimbabwe.

An undated document published on the *National Association of Societies for the Care of the Handicapped (NASCOH)* website states:

“According to WHO estimates, there are about 1,3million people have disabilities in Zimbabwe, which is about 10% of the total population. In common with the fate of people with disabilities the world over, people with disabilities in Zimbabwe suffer from widespread violation of their fundamental freedoms and rights. They face exclusion from education, employment, cultural activities, festivals, sports and social events and are especially vulnerable to poverty, physical and sexual violence, lack of access to health care, emotional abuse and neglect. Only 33% of children with disabilities in Zimbabwe have access to education, compared with over 90% for the able-bodied populace. The stigma and discrimination attached to disability stems from the way society views disability: People with disabilities are still being viewed from a medical and welfare framework, identifying people with disabilities as ill, different from their non-disabled peers, and in need of care. As a result of the emphasis on the medical need, there is neglect of the wider political, social and economic needs of people with disabilities and their families. Therefore, people with disabilities face discrimination in accessing information, employment, health and education.” (National Association of Societies for the Care of the Handicapped (NASCOH) (undated) *Disability in Zimbabwe*)

A report published by the international charity *Progressio*, in a section headed “Causes of disability”, states:

“A number of negative beliefs on the causes of disabilities persist in Zimbabwe, such as associating disability with witchcraft or maternal promiscuity. The culture in Zimbabwe is still to look at disability as a curse. Generally there is limited social acceptance of people with disabilities by their families (particularly their fathers and paternal relatives) and the communities they live in. The birth of a child with a disability is viewed as a taboo that is likely to bring bad omen to the family. Fathers of such children would usually blame the disability on the mother.” (Progressio (January 2007) *The forgotten tribe: People with disabilities in Zimbabwe*, p.7)

In a section headed “Disability and poverty” this report states:

“Almost every community attaches stigma to disability. People with disabilities are often considered as incapable, economically unproductive and needing to be taken care of. It is this attitude that marginalises persons with disabilities more than their impairments. Zimbabwe is no exception. In addition, public spaces, amenities and transport make no allowance for people with disabilities and little is being done to integrate them into mainstream society or prioritise their needs in development planning. As a result, the vast majority of disabled people remain among the poorest of the poor, deprived of the ability or the opportunity to fulfil their basic needs. Families of people with disabilities often do not have land to grow food. They have

inadequate income to purchase their basic needs: food and shelter. Sustenance and sanitation are inadequate, and access to health care is very limited. Family members often become ill, and some of the diseases are potentially disabling. Information gathered in the survey indicated that many people with disabilities acknowledge that their situation plays a role in their social and economic development. Disability affects the chances of attending school, finding employment, and participating as equals in society.” (ibid, p.12)

This section of the report continues:

“Literacy levels of people with disabilities are generally lower than the rest of the population, while people with disabilities are much less likely to be engaged in economic activity than the rest of the population. Survey responses show that difficulties in obtaining employment affect people with disabilities of all ages. Women with disabilities are worse off as they face a double discrimination because of their gender and their condition. To sum up, people with disabilities face numerous challenges in achieving equality of opportunity: environmental and access barriers, legal and institutional barriers, and attitudinal barriers that cause social exclusion.” (ibid, p.12)

The 2011 *United States Department of State* country report for Zimbabwe, in a section titled “Persons with Disabilities”, states:

“The constitution and law prohibit discrimination against persons with disabilities in employment, access to public places, and the provision of services; however, the law was not widely known or implemented by government institutions. The lack of resources devoted to training and education severely hampered the ability of persons with disabilities to compete for scarce jobs. The law stipulates that government buildings be accessible to persons with disabilities, but implementation was slow. NGOs continued to lobby to include persons with albinism in the definition of ‘disabled’ under the law. Persons with disabilities faced harsh societal discrimination. Traditional belief viewed persons with disabilities as bewitched and, consequently, as persons who should be locked away; children with disabilities often were hidden when visitors arrived.” (United States Department of State (8 April 2011) *2010 Human Rights Report: Zimbabwe*)

This section of the report also states:

“Children with disabilities were discriminated against in educational institutions. The unavailability of essential services, including sign language interpreters, Braille materials, and ramps prevented children with disabilities from attending school. Many schools refused to accept children with certain disabilities. According to the National Association of Societies for the Care of the Handicapped, persons with disabilities continued to be a forgotten and invisible group in society. For example, although an estimated 10 percent of citizens had disabilities, they were marginalized from HIV/AIDS intervention programs. The organization also reported that only 33 percent of children with disabilities had access to education.” (ibid)

A country advice document published by the Australian *Refugee Review Tribunal*, in response to the question “To what extent do people with a disability face societal discrimination or harm in Zimbabwe?” states:

“The myths and misunderstandings surrounding disabilities contribute to the exclusion of disabled people in Zimbabwe. Societal attitudes towards disabled people

are reflective of the widely held perception 'that people with disabilities are useless liabilities who have no role to play in society'. This perception is demonstrated in a statement by an influential leader of a women's organisation in Zimbabwe. When invited to discuss the work of the Disabled Women Support Organisation (DWSO), she replied 'We do not network with people with disabilities. What will [people] say if I am seen having a meeting with you? You have to stay indoors and ask the Department of Social Welfare to assist you with food.' Disabled people are thus often confined to specialised institutions and not included in wider society. As well as attitudinal barriers to social inclusion, disabled people in Zimbabwe face environmental, legal and institutional barriers to achieving equal opportunity." (Australian Government – Refugee Review Tribunal (6 August 2010) *Zimbabwe – ZWE37065 – People with disabilities – Ethnic Indians – Support services – State protection – War veterans*, pp.1-2)

An article from *The National* states:

"Tsvarai Mungoni, 40, is educated and highly politically conscious, but he says he has always had a niggling feeling that tells him that his political awareness is hollow. Mr Mungoni, who is blind, has never voted because he feels the electoral system disenfranchises him. 'I am visually impaired and willing to exercise what, in theory, is my inalienable right to vote, but I am incapacitated. Our voting system does not guarantee us exercising that right freely and democratically because it does not provide for Braille ballot papers. In fact, right from political campaigns to the day of voting there is absolutely no literature in Braille.' Because of the absence of Braille ballot papers, electoral law says blind voters are assisted to vote by officers presiding over polling stations, in the presence of a police officer and agents of contesting political parties. The presiding officer asks the blind voter whom he or she wants to vote for, and then marks the ballot for the preferred candidate. Mr Mungoni said this is degrading and violates the concept of a secret ballot. 'We are adults. That is why we are eligible to vote, but we don't want to be treated like we are helpless. I do not know the political affiliation of the officers, and in our volatile political conditions you don't know what will follow.'" (The National (8 June 2009) *Zimbabwe's disabled battle to vote*)

An article from *The Zimbabwean* states:

"Few years ago there were complaints from many members of Disabled Peoples Organisations (DPOs) in Zimbabwe that disabled girls were being sterilised without their consent. Various methods were used in fulfilment of this goal. It was alleged then that some parents of disabled children made sure that their daughters had their uterus surgically removed so as to prevent them from having children in future. Ironically, parents of disabled daughters felt that they were doing a natural parental favour to their off springs. It was believed by some of the parents that it would be a burden in future, for a disabled woman to endure the pain associated with pregnancy and giving birth. And in addition to that, there was also the question of who would look after the baby because it could not be imagined that a disabled woman could get married." (The Zimbabwean (2 July 2010) *Disabled used as guinea pigs*)

An article published on the Zimbabwean activist website *Kubatana.net* states:

"In a country once referred to as 'one of the most disability-accessible countries in Africa', with supposedly greater availability of friendly disability legislation, free public transport and eligibility for government disability allowance – one tends to wonder what hope exists for a family such as Grace's as systems continue to deteriorate in

Zimbabwe. The country's social welfare department is probably at its most impoverished and demoralised at this stage as it can hardly afford to offer any assistance to disabled and disadvantaged children. In the not so long ago past, the ministry has paid out monthly pittance per disabled child. Now, even that has not been forthcoming, and in the face of this – local minibus services are unwilling to take the time and trouble to load up children in wheelchairs. While the constitutional outreach programme is underway, these are some of the issues that need serious attention. Children in these circumstances are scattered all over the country; a number of them hidden from society while many will never have a shot at normal life because of prohibitive socio – economic and policy factors.” (Kubatana.net (27 July 2010) *Plight of the disabled needs attention in Zimbabwe*)

This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Refugee Documentation Centre within time constraints. This response is not and does not purport to be conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Please read in full all documents referred to.

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