



AS IT IS

Zimbabwean Girl Uses Martial Arts to Warn Against Child Marriage

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In Zimbabwe, some girls are forced to marry as young as the age of 10 because of poverty or for traditional or religious reasons.

One Zimbabwean teenager is using the sport of taekwondo to give girls from a poor community a fighting chance to have a better life. Natsiraishe Maritsa has been a fan of taekwondo since she was very young. Taekwondo is a Korean **martial art**.

Today, the 17-year-old holds taekwondo **lessons** outside her parents' home in the poor settlement of Epworth. The area is about 15 kilometers south of the capital, Harare.

“Not many people do taekwondo here, so it’s **fascinating** for the girls, both married and single,” Maritsa said. “I use it to get their attention.” Children as young as four follow her instructions to stretch, kick, strike and **punch**. After class, the group talks about the risks of child marriage.

Newly married girls led one recent discussion. One by one, they describe extreme abuse they have experienced in their marriages. They describe being raped and being hungry.

“We are not ready for this thing called marriage. We are just too young for it,” Maritsa told The Associated Press. She described her small group as “a safe space” for the girls to share ideas.

“I use their voices, their **challenges**, to discourage those young girls not yet married to stay off early sexual activity and marriage,” Maritsa said.

Zimbabwe law says boys and girls cannot legally marry until they reach the age of 18. That law was passed in 2016. Child marriage, however, is widespread in the southern African nation.

For some poor families, the reason is an economic one. Marrying off a young daughter means fewer costs. The rights group Girls Not Brides says the bride price paid by husbands of these girls is “used by families as a means of survival.”

An estimated 30 percent of girls in Zimbabwe are married before they reach 18, the United Nations Children’s Fund says. Rising poverty during the COVID-19 pandemic has increased pressures on families around the world to marry off their young daughters.

Maritsa’s group is called Vulnerable Underaged People’s Auditorium. She started the project in 2018 after seeing her friends leave school for marriage. She hopes to increase the **confidence** of both married and unmarried girls through the martial arts lessons and discussions.

She accepts 15 students in each lesson, she said. “The only support I get is from my parents.” After class, her parents usually provide fresh juice and sweets.

Zimbabwe recently announced a ban on public gatherings. The measure is meant to slow the spread of the coronavirus. The ban has forced Maritsa to suspend her lessons, but she hopes to restart as soon as the country’s **lockdown** is lifted.

Maritsa said, “From being hopeless, the young mothers feel empowered...being able to use their stories to **dissuade** other girls from falling into the same trap.”

I’m Ashley Thompson.

The Associated Press reported this story. Ashley Thompson adapted it for VOA Learning English. Mario Ritter, Jr. was the editor.

Words in This Story

martial art *-n.* one of several forms of fighting and self-defense that are widely practiced as a sport

lesson *-n.* something learned from experience

fascinating *-adj.* very interesting or appealing

punch -*v.* to strike with a closed hand

challenge -*n.* a difficult task or problem

confidence -*n.* a feeling of belief that you can do something

lockdown -*n.* an emergency situation in which people are not permitted to move around freely

dissuade -*v.* to persuade someone not to do something

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