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## The agony of being an albino

ROPAFADZO MAPIMHIDZE, FEATURES AND SUPPLEMENTS EDITOR | HARARE - Jul 20 2011 16:45

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John Makumbe, a professor of political science at the University of Zimbabwe and president of the Zimbabwe Albino Association (Zimas) — a non-governmental organisation — faces discrimination every day of his life.

“When I walk into a dining hall or during tea break at workshops, I make sure that everybody takes their food and tea first and wait until everyone has taken their portion. There are people who will not share a teaspoon with me and I have learnt to live with that,” Makumbe said.

“I am also aware that not everybody accepts a handshake from me, so I wait for them to stretch their hands first. There are shops that will tell me openly not to touch anything. But if God made me this way, then it is not my problem.”

Albinism is an inherited genetic condition akin to sickle cell anemia that renders persons or animals unnaturally white in the skin and hair, with pink eyes, due to a quirky lack of natural colouring materials or pigments called melanin that give natural colour to normal species.

“It can attack one generation and skip another generation. But if our children grow up and marry albinos, chances of giving birth to albinos are great,” Makumbe said.

Makumbe was nearly killed at birth because the midwives suspected that his mother had had a sexual relationship with some white missionaries in Buhera District during the pre-colonial era.

Albinos are viewed by the wider society in much the same way twins and lepers were viewed in the past. There are over 14 000 albinos in Zimbabwe, a figure based on the last census. Makumbe said he had since lobbied for a category that will include people living with albinism in the next census.

“At least 60-70 % of albinos are aged below 50. Very few reach 60 as they largely succumb to skin cancer, HIV and Aids,” Makumbe said.

Their skin cannot stand the ultraviolet rays of the sun that normal pigment tropical dwellers can withstand. Their skins break up and crack resulting in all sorts of skin infections that eventually lead to cancer.

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“A lot of men and women have become victims of a falsehood which states that if you have sex

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with an albino, you will be healed from HIV infection that causes Aids. Our girls have been raped and this is a matter of great concern," he said.

"Young men too have been sexually abused by women who also believe they can be healed from that affliction, but we all know that these are just myths."

Makumbe says at least 60% of people living with albinism are located in rural areas where some are subjected to inhuman treatment.

Albinos have suffered very grievous discrimination and deprivations, even from the well-educated and progressive governments.

Because of their special genetic anomalies, albinos also suffer other unique afflictions. They have a hard time attracting marriage partners and those that eventually marry, face a lot of resistance from family members.

Albinos suffer from very poor eyesight but some teachers push them to the back of the classroom which makes it difficult for them to see what is on the chalkboard.

"These children walk up and down to the chalkboard because their teachers do not want them near their desks at the front. That is also what happened to me when I was a child. But the Ministry of Education is so far the only government organ that has employed albinos as teachers. Other employers are reluctant to engage albinos in their workforce."

The police have also conscripted some albinos, but the numbers are very low. Makumbe argues that Zimas should be recognised as a human rights organisation and not a social welfare body.

"The government thinks Zimas is doing social welfare (work) and yet we are dealing with a disability which unfortunately is being ignored."

He says the Disability Board resolved that the Zimbabwe Revenue Authority exempts import duty on cars bought by albinos but this has been overlooked.

"I bought a car recently and when I queried about the directive on duty I was told that exemption was for people with permanent disabilities, but as you can see I am a permanently-disabled person."

Although the government initially gave Zimas funds, private donors like the Christian Community Participation Trust (CCPT) and the Spanish Embassy have also made substantial donations to the organisation. Sanders Opticians is yet another company that dispenses at least six pairs of spectacles to Zimas every month.

"I am so grateful to Strive Masiyiwa's CCPT, the embassy and Sanders Opticians. They have eased the suffering of many of our members," Makumbe says. Recently, Square Deal, a distributor for the LeSol range of sunscreen products that give protection against sunburn, donated 48 boxes with 12 bottles each of the lotion. Last year, the company donated 100 boxes to Zimas which were distributed to albinos around the country.

"We hope to make it a regular affair. Sadly, so many of those who need sun care protection products simply cannot afford them," said Square Deal official Shearol Langeveldt at the presentation ceremony at Zimas offices.

"The albino community is especially vulnerable to skin damage due to sunburn on unprotected skin. This leads to great discomfort, sores and infection often leading to cancer. And unfortunately someone with an unhealthy skin is often prejudiced both at home and work," Langeveldt added.

#### TOPICS IN THIS ARTICLE

#### COMMENTS

George and Mike, you are nothing but Black trash !And you belong to a terrorist party!

**TJINGABABILI MIHA** on July 21, 2011, 7:10 am

guys guys siyanai na george na mike they don't know what they are talking about or maybe they just want to make a "small" talk.  
People with albinism are at all times being discriminated and segregated against. no need to argue on that issue. i totally agree with the prof on the issue of them dying with HIV and AIDS this is true, the info available on HIV issues are in small print and these guys they can't read it and so they are always left out.  
may be the prof and his team should work on making people understand that those myths are lies.

**Tauya Simbanegavi** on July 21, 2011, 8:22 am

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@GOERGE AND MIKE, Your fury cannot touch him, neither can it make him less of a man because he is more man than you two combined. Your mothers never fixed any good teaching into your hearts and if they did the screws came loose. To curse you would only make you more unstable as you are already cursed saka takusiira pano.

**juks mbiri** on July 21, 2011, 6:19 am

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@GOERGE AND MIKE, Your fury cannot touch him, neither can it make him less of a man because he is more man than you two combined. Your mothers never fixed any good teaching into your hearts and if they did the screws came loose. To curse you would only make you more unstable as you are already cursed saka takusiira pano.

**juks mbiri** on July 21, 2011, 6:19 am

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My God this Professor is a liar of the first order? Since when have albinos been discriminated against? Throughout my school life in Bulawayo Harare and Gweru, and my working life, I never came across any incident when an albino was discriminated. What I recall is other children offering their albino classmate hats or something to cover themselves on sunny days especially in September or October.

Does he not have shame to speak this nonsense, against his own people. I have a feeling that he wishes he was white?

**George Bachinche** on July 20, 2011, 10:05 pm

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George Bachinche you are sick and a moron, stick to politics we know you are ZANU PF and hate Makumbe's guts, do not personalise his issues, who does not know that albinos are discriminated even the term murungudunhu is defamatory and Mike Ndllovu the less said about you the better is it not funny that you and George two die hard ZANU PF demagogues are the first to comment on a purely human rights story - and I know the reason why. You are just two fools like the rest of ZANU PF idiots who have ruined the country and now we do not even have our own currency to use and this happened under ZANU PF watch mapenzi! Go to hell who cares what you think and write I don't give a hoot

**Reg Mtutu** on July 20, 2011, 11:09 pm

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John has brought such respectability to these citizens. His courage and good sense of humour are a welcome difference to the dreary world of cheap 'excuses' for disability. Besides, John is generally politically correct. I may differ with him on 'which MDC', but we share a lot - humanity and democracy!

**Rejoice Ngwenya** on July 21, 2011, 8:52 am

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Makumbe is an idiot and a liar. He still thinks people mistake albinos for whites....

**Mike Ndllovu** on July 20, 2011, 8:27 pm

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Professor Makumbe...the Anglo-Saxon from Buhera. I have been at functions with him and he has a healthy appetite befitting a man of his size...and I have never seen him cowering into a corner waiting for others to eat so that he can have their leftovers.

Professor Makumbe is an idiot and a liar...but I respect him tremendously because he is educated and argues his points...which I do not agree with...eloquently....I read all his press articles...just like I read Prof Ncube, Prof Mukonoweshuro, Prof Moyo, Prof Obama, Dr Cameron, Dr Mahoso, Nathaniel Manheru...Prof Mutambara...etc...I have no time for uneducated Matombo, Tsvangson, Zuma, Chiluba, Gaddafi, telling people "look at me ...education is not that important"

**Mike Ndllovu** on July 21, 2011, 7:08 am

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Nothing is as painful as being discriminated against especially on the basis of a condition one cannot change. Let us all progressive people have within ourselves room for accepting that we are born different, not by choice but by default. Being white, black, or coloured does not make one superior neither is being albino inferior.

**Moto Moto** on July 23, 2011, 7:11 am

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Bachinche and Ndllovu are idiots vana veshorttime muVito Redroom Bar forgive them please. What the prof is saying is very true but what he must fight for is for albinos to get free lotions and pay like what others in South Africa get. If they are paid something and get free lotion you will love their skin even kudanana naye zvinotodadisa, A lot are in love and married to those with normal skin. Saka prof. you must fight for the rights of Albinos.

**crispen taworamoyo** on July 21, 2011, 6:46 am

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Please do not just politicise this issue. Everything in this article is true and so touching. Who doesn't know that albinos are the mostly segregated against folk?

**Cee kayn Cee kayn** on July 21, 2011, 2:13 am

Have you already forgotten about yester-year's fishermen's myth in that other African country. Be serious ne issue iyl.

**Cee kayn Cee kayn** on July 21, 2011, 2:30 am

If i were to come across some loads of money the first thing i will do is search for Mike and George and send these idiots to school. Kusangova nenjere ndaona chironda chinorwadza kwete muridzi chete. Vanondinzwisa tsitsi nelevel of madness and stupidity yavo so!

Prof Makumbe keep on fighting for the betterment of this special group, our prayers are with you in all your endeavours.

**Time Ichakwana** on July 21, 2011, 8:00 am

Mike who told you Cameron was a Dr? You Mike and George have have warped thinking. Professor Makumbe is saying things he experiences and people in the same situation experience. Let people who are directly affected by their own situation tell us what the confront on a daily basis. We all know that discrimination does happen against minorities in every society and in most cases this is caused by prejudice that stems from ignorance.I have interacted with Professor Makumbe before and know him as a gifted frank intellectual who stands for the truth. That is why people in certain circles which we will not specify by name loathe him. Justice Muchadura.

**Johannes Maronda** on July 21, 2011, 8:14 am

Like Reg Mtutu, one can't help but be angered by the idiotic comments made by George and Mike. Those who sent George to school obviously wasted a lot of time and money on him because what it was supposed to achieve did not happen. As for Mike, Reg says it all, I will not waste time saying anything about him, it's been said time and time again...he's an idiot of the first order. Both these guys are probably non existent figments of some morons imagination in the govt or at the Herald House.

**Gabriel Stool** on July 21, 2011, 2:10 am

People with albinism are human beings just like anyone else. In terms of human rights approach, all human rights are equal. A country that does not respect human rights cannot be described as a developed nation. Let us all start respecting the rights of people with albinism and other disabilities. I am shocked to learn that people purport to be ignorant of the fact that people with albinism face discrimination. Probably, these are the chief culprits which generate prejudices and discrimination against the people with albinism. It is high time that people need to agree at all that discrimination is a common practice. If we continue to disagree on common issues, we will reverse our development. We need to move forward and avoid barbaric approaches on human rights issues.

**Andrew Chikwai** on July 21, 2011, 8:31 am

Prof Mukumbe is correct, disrimination against people with disability is there. Please note that this is not a political issue but a biological one.

As for those who are saying "those who sent George to school..wasted their time and money.." I have a question for you, did George went to school? For me I doubt!

We should all strive to enlight people like George otherwise our future is doomed.

**James Shoko** on July 21, 2011, 7:26 am

supposing that we all read the article in clear light and that we don't have any visual impairments, the issue is purely non-political and totally a social and biological matter!!! so where does politics come in? in as long as we politicise all issues then we will never move forward,politically economically or even morally, and for those who think only doctors and processors are the only people with brains, shame on you. i can only tell you at this moment that it is the average man that achieves a lot if you dont know that

**danton tindo** on July 21, 2011, 9:07 am

I have ready many a political comments by Makumbe and having not personally met him I think he is a likeable fella. However I have to disagree with many of his comments in this article. He says:

"When I walk into a dining hall or during tea break at workshops, I make sure that everybody takes their food and tea first and wait until everyone has taken their portion...I am also aware that not everybody accepts a handshake from me, so I wait for them to stretch their hands first..."

This is utter inferiority complex that he alone can deal with first. This is the problem blacks in general have with whites because they automatically assume that they are looked down upon. He needs to take the initiative and combat this stigma.

Cheers!

**ThePanAfricanist ThePanAfricanist** on July 21, 2011, 7:10 am

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Albinos are still segregated and discriminated against today. I often attend workshops in which an albino is a regular participant and I have seen this happen to him on several occasions. However, not all of them suffer this as we have seen some being accepted into their societies

**most makwiravana** on July 21, 2011, 6:48 am

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Zimbabweans are full of denials, if you are not an albino please shut up because you know nothing. I don't want to comment on fools because they will get the pleasure. What I can say to Prof Makumbe is keep on the good work, but there is still more to be done. The first task would be a census to locate all albinos so that you also take care of their welfare.

**Mutsonzo Mukachana** on July 21, 2011, 12:20 pm

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people should make a habit of commenting on what they know. if you have nothing to say shut up. George and Mike's priceless advice for you. what would be your first reaction on encountering a girl with albinism on a reception desk? would you make her a model for your clothing line? would you let a man with albinism marry your daughter Mike, what about your sister George? you have just helped prove Makumbe's point with your comments.

**Tipei Mukana** on July 21, 2011, 8:51 pm

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