

ZIO MWALE
Lusaka

WHEN Chola Mumba hit puberty age, which usually happens when one becomes a teenager, he realised was male although he had been raised as a girl by his parents.

Chola was born with genitals that did not resemble either a boy's or a girl's. He was intersex.

"I saw my friends developing breasts and started menstrual cycles, meanwhile I was growing more into a man and there was really nothing feminine about me. I felt stuck," he says.

When he was born, his parents named him Memory, and for 13 years he lived as a girl. He did not know he was intersex, no-one told him he was different.

"My parents told me I was female, and my body, prior to puberty, looked like that of a boy still. I was expecting secondary female characteristics, none of that happened," he says.

I met Chola at a meeting meant to raise awareness about intersex people at one of the low-budget hotels in Lusaka.

Various media houses had been invited to learn about intersex people and their rights.

The meeting was organised by Intersex Society of Zambia (ISSZ), a fairly new non-profitable organisation championing rights of intersex people.

But in a society where intersex people are not recognised, and are usually associated with homosexuality, which is illegal in Zambia, many of the intersex people never come out in public.

At the meeting I attended, there were only three people who identified themselves as intersex.

During the meeting, the association shared how it is trying to fight stigma and discrimination faced by the intersex society, and how it is advocating for the inclusion of intersex people in the national data as an independent gender.

Kenya is one of the countries in Africa that recently officially recognised intersex as a gender.

The country's National Bureau of Statistics added intersex as the third gender in the upcoming national census.

Kenians will be given the option to identify themselves as either male, female or intersex.

For Chola, a lot happened when he reached 13 years old. He says when puberty kicked in, he fully understood he was different, and he shunned away from his friends and community.

He also started getting sexually attracted to girls, and he became muscular and his voice became deeper.

He lost all touch with girlhood.

When he knew he was different he became a recluse; a misfit in society.

At that point, Chola realised he had no gender, and he watched as his friends matured into young women, while he gradually changed into a man.

His first day at Emmasdale Basic School, when he reported for his eighth grade, it suddenly hit him that he was trapped in a wrong body.

Stuck in the middle

All I wanted was to be me, says intersex man

"When I reached the school I turned heads, everyone was looking at me wondering why a boy was dressed in a girl's uniform. It was mind-blowing for me because I did not realise my looks changed to attract that kind of attention," he says.

"Literally everywhere I passed I could hear pupils talking about me, I was dying inside me and I did not know what to do with myself," he says.

One day, Chola approached his aunt and told her about his intention to change his gender. But his aunt would not approve of it.

"I thought to myself why fight it, why should I be stuck in this body? I stopped going to school," he says.

After a month of trying to make his aunt understand, Chola finally went back to school, now dressed in a boy's uniform.

"My aunt really wanted me to be educated, she had to let me change when she found out I was not attending classes for over a month. I was young but I knew exactly what I wanted, I wanted to be me," he says.

"Funny enough when I went back to school no one noticed me, everyone just thought I was somebody else. My aunt explained to the administration, my name was automatically

‘I had to always shield myself. I did not want people to know who I was.’

changed to Chola and no pupil noticed," he says.

But changing his name and wardrobe did not fully help Chola become the person he really wanted to be. He still felt unaccepted and unloved. His sudden change was received with mixed feelings by his family and community.

"My decision was received with mixed feelings, some understood but others told me I was going against the will of my parents because this is not what they wanted me to be," says Chola.

"I never met my mother, she died when I was six months old, I have only seen her on pictures while dad died when I was five years old," he says.

Chola found it hard to make friends at school, and remembers how when he qualified to Olympia Park Secondary School, he kept a low profile, fearing to be stigmatised. He lived a secret life.

To erase everything attached to his background, Chola burnt all childhood pictures.

"My school years were not good," he says. "I had to always shield myself. I did not want people to know who I was. I only had one teacher called Mr Nkhomwe at Emmasdale Basic; he was my first support system, he knew who I was, and he was a good friend" he says.

After high school, Chola says he experienced the worst moment of his life when he was called a curse by a close relative. He had no one to talk

to. Almost all family members acted like enemies.

"I remember being told I was the reason why my mother died because I was a curse," he says.

When the mental torture became unbearable, Chola became suicidal.

"I felt I had nothing to live for, so I tried to kill myself by taking Doom [Insecticide], but I was shocked I woke up the following morning. I tried again the following week but I did not die. I guess God still wanted me alive," he says.

In 2017, Chola was brave enough to come out in public about his gender when he met Mphasto Sakala, an intersex person leading ISSZ.

He says he met Mphasto after his sister shared an article on an intersex person and activists Anick Soni, who is based in the United Kingdom. From then on, he realised he was not the only one.

"I found Anick online and I contacted him. We started talking and he later introduced me to other activists [like] James Karanja in Kenya, who referred me to Mphasto," he says.

For the first time, Chola met someone who was like him.

"I remember meeting Mphasto at Levy Junction and I felt at peace and a sense of relief. I was looking at someone like me and I underwent counselling with his help. I learnt to accept myself, that being intersex is okay," he says.

Chola says there are a lot of intersex people who are on the verge of losing hope due to stigma and discrimination, but they need to understand that being intersex is not a curse.

"It is all up in our mind," he says. "We defeat ourselves psychologically, we can do what everyone can do and if you do not want to come out in the public it is okay, but accept yourself and live your life to the fullest."

On November 8, 2017, the Lusaka High Court passed a landmark judgment allowing a 23-year-old resident of Kafue who had grown up as a woman to officially change her gender and become a man.

In an affidavit filed in the Lusaka High Court on May 30, 2017, Hellen Sibanda indicated that she was born with a condition known as Disorder of Sex Development.

Sibanda stated that as a result of the condition, "my genitals appear to be that of a female, but that I am in fact genetically and biologically a male with my testicles hidden internally beneath my stomach".

According to Sibanda, his parents and doctors were not aware of his condition and hence incorrectly concluded that he was female by simply looking at his genitals.

However, when the child reached puberty, it did not develop breasts or experience menstruation as a normal female.

Professor Paolo Marandola, a sexologist who has worked in Zambia for decades, differentiates intersex from transgender and homosexuality.

He told the **Zambia Daily Mail** following Sibanda's case that the problem is that many people in Zambia confuse transgender with homosexuality.

"Transgender is clearly classified as a psychiatric disease," he said. "There is a

clear separation between transgender and homosexuality."

He said a man who is trapped in a female body will be attracted to a male, hence most transgender get involved in gay relationships.

He said intersex people can be helped because theirs is not a preference but a medical condition they are born with caused by a hormonal imbalance.

According to Prof Marandola, in a normal man, there are 5.0 units of testosterone and 0.1 estrogen, and vice-versa in a woman.

He said the hormones are like an orchestra in a human body.

"There must be balance like in an orchestra," he said.

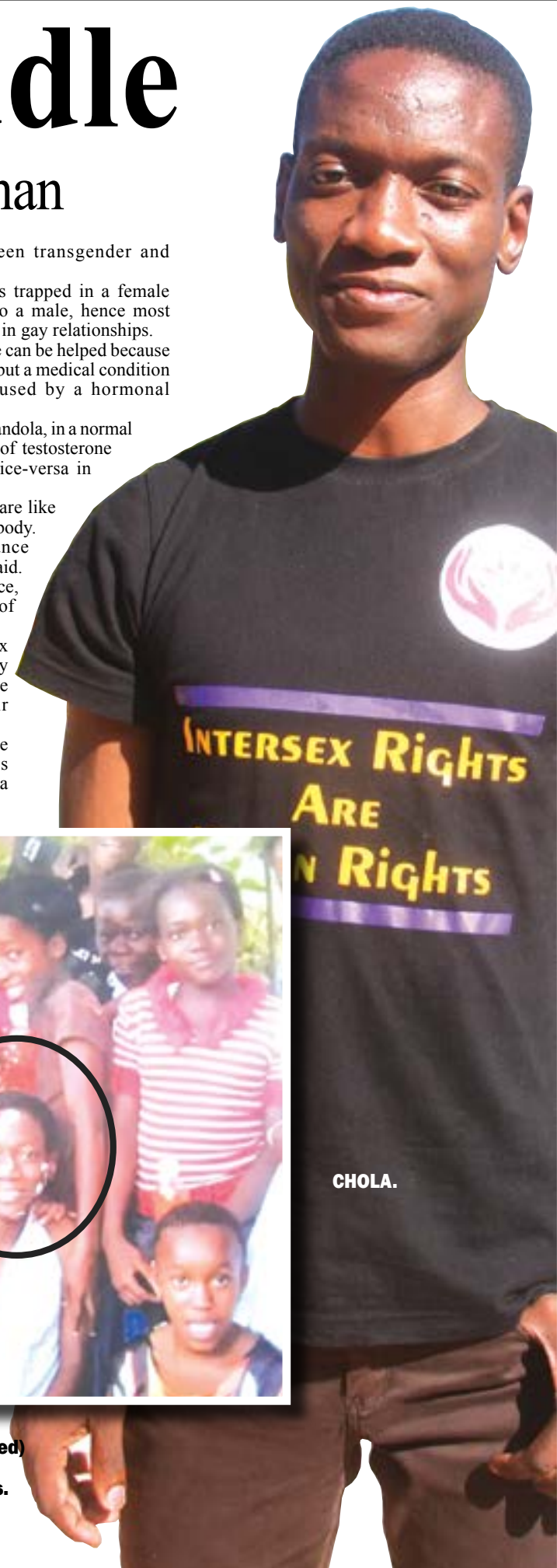
"When there is imbalance, then there is a change of behaviour."

He thinks intersex people have been unfairly treated because people do not understand their condition.

"The country must give an answer to everyone's problem," Prof Marandola had said.



CHOLA Mumba (circled) celebrating his 10th birthday with friends.



A FLOOD victim stands in front of a temporary shelter.



MEN carry blankets for flood victims in Mambwe District.

How climate change threatens our lives

VIOLET MENG'O
Lusaka

FLOODS are one of the most devastating natural disasters experienced in some parts of Zambia, affecting mostly the poorest communities in unplanned settlements in urban areas and villages lying close to water bodies.

Early this year, a number of families in the northern part of Zambia were affected by floods, with parts of Luapula Province experiencing the worst flooding since 1949.

The floods left a trail of destruction in Samfya, Mansa, Mwense and Chembe districts. Many crop fields and houses were destroyed, threatening people's livelihoods.

Lameck Mbula of Chizimba village in Chama district, Muchinga Province, was one of the affected people.

Mr Mbula lost all his crops. He also lost his household goods.

"The rainfall pattern has changed; the rains mostly start late and end early. The weather is very unpredictable, making it difficult for us to plan ahead," lamented Mr Mbula, who is a small-scale farmer.

Mr Mbula's worry is not just about the unpredictable rainfall pattern, but also its intensity.

As a result of the changing climate and shifting seasons, farmers are slowly learning to adapt.

Another flood victim, Palo Lisulo, a mother of five of Chembe district, lost all her livestock and crops.

"My house, which was made of mud bricks, has been washed away and I have been left with nothing," she said.

Ms Palo was moved to a temporary shelter by the Disaster Management and Mitigation Unit (DMMU). She is still rebuilding her house although not fast enough to finish it before the next rainy season.

Robert Kapotwe, of Samfya district, and his family had to be airlifted to safety when floodwaters covered their area.

His house was submerged in floods and all the food that the family had stored was destroyed.

"It was practically impossible for my family to save any of the property and goods because of the floods that covered most parts of the district. All we cared for at that moment were our lives," Mr Kapotwe said.

He said the rains were heavy. "It was like you are on a boat in a raging river."

Mr Kapotwe feared that the roof of his house would be blown off.

Yet the threat from flooding is likely to increase due to the effects of climate change and rapid urbanisation placing more people in harm's way.

In fact, the Meteorological Department predicts that floods will get worse with time.

And apart from the humanitarian crisis they cause by destroying people's livelihoods, floods also stifle development efforts at every level. They affect many sectors, from agriculture to sanitation, environment and education.

Women are usually in the majority of people affected in the initial phase of an emergency such as floods and therefore need special care and protection.

When the flood and the water levels rose in Chembe district, the women and children were evacuated to safety. The same happened in Samfya district and all the flood-affected areas.

The old women and children who could not run were assisted by the young people in the village.

For Chembe, Mwense and Kawambwa, most of the flood victims had moved to safe zones while waiting for the DMMU to provide them with tents.

While a number of them have had their houses rebuilt, some are still in the process of rebuilding their lives. The floods brought about destruction to property.

Climate change has not been ruled out as a cause because, although most parts of Luapula have water bodies such as rivers, they are not necessarily prone to flooding.

With the help of DMMU, the flood victims received bags of mealie-meal, blankets, bags of beans, mosquito nets and bottles of chlorox.

Additionally, through the Ministry of Community Development and Social Services, the flood victims also received bags of mealie-meal specifically for the aged and the disabled.

Minister of Finance Bwalya Ng'andu in the 2021 national budget increased the number of beneficiaries on the Social Cash Transfer (SCT) from 700,000 to 994,000 households in 2021.

The amount per household will also be

‘My house, which was made of mud bricks, has been washed away and I have been left with nothing.’

increased to K110 from the current K90 per month.

A total of 90,202 households were supported under floods and droughts emergency cash transfers in 23 districts while 258,000 households were supported under the COVID-19 emergency cash transfers across the country.

To enhance household food security, Government has increased the number of beneficiaries under the Food Security Pack Programme to 288,492 in 2021 from 80,000 in 2020.

According to DMMU, the floods have caused widespread destruction in the affected areas countrywide, affecting a total of 1.5 million people in 63 districts.

DMMU national coordinator Chanda Kabwe

said things will probably get worse before they start getting better.

"We have over 1.5 million people affected by the floods in 63 districts, with five districts affected by drought; the damage is very heavy on Government. We have to feed these people between now and the next harvest," Mr Kabwe said.

"We are working at full speed to respond to the most urgent needs of the affected populations in the affected areas," he added.

Mr Kabwe said the impact of the floods is visible on the faces of the affected people, whose homes were reduced to rubble.

"Most flood victims have the same story. Nothing is left," said Mr Kabwe. "Our crops, livestock and houses [are gone], most water sources are damaged and contaminated."

According to Mr Kabwe, the floods were the worst since 1949 in Luapula Province, causing Lake Bangweulu to burst its shoreline.

He said some of the affected flood victims are living in government buildings such as schools, lodges and churches. The floods came at the heel of another natural disaster – a drought that affected 2.3 million people in 87 districts, resulting in food scarcity.

"We provided relief to the people until the end of the season. We did not record any death due to hunger," Mr Kabwe said.

Parliament early this year spoke on how people need to prepare for climate shocks by adopting new methods of farming.

Between February and April, DMMU spent K5 million responding to flood disasters. The unit has distributed approximately 115,000 bags of mealie-meal to the flood-hit districts since the beginning of the season.

It has also distributed 15,000 bags of maize, of which 1,200 metric tonnes had to be air-lifted to the victims.

To date, DMMU is still supporting families in Mwense, Mwanabombwe and Kawambwa districts, while in Eastern Province, affected

families in Chipangali and Vubwi are still receiving government support.

According to Mr Kabwe, one of the lessons learnt from addressing flood disasters is not to build along the river banks.

"The local authority and Ministry of Lands should work together in the allocation of land, especially in opening land for settlement," Mr Kabwe said.

He said in areas where bridges have been washed away, engineers should ensure that they construct infrastructure that is resilient to climate change.

Other lessons learnt by Government are that the negative impact of climate change has continued to affect lives.

"We have also learnt that we need to plant more trees to avoid winds that in most cases come with heavy rains, and also need to adopt a culture of building structures that stand the shocks of climate change," Mr Kabwe said.

He said more importantly, DMMU has learnt the need to enhance sensitisation of people, especially in flood-prone areas, on how best to keep up in case of an emergency.

To enhance information dissemination on climate change in Africa, a virtual workshop for African journalists was held from October 14 to 16, 2020 by Africa 21.

During the training, journalists were trained to understand the geopolitical approach of climate change crisis as well as climate change risks and humanitarian crisis, among other topics.

"We need to train and prepare people in emergency response and disaster risk reduction. The best resilient mechanism is to educate people in disaster risk reduction activities and how best to stand the shocks of the calamities," Mr Kabwe said.

Moving forward, Government and stakeholders will be better prepared to address climate change disasters because for the first time in the history of the country, a world-class emergency centre will be built.