

STORY OF CHANGE

GENDER DESKS TRANSFORMING SUPPORT FOR GBV SURVIVORS IN FAITH COMMUNITIES

One of the most significant changes during the first half of 2026 was the establishment of gender desks in ten of the twenty four faith communities the project is directly implementing SASA! Faith project in, in four wards of Bikita District. These include six Apostolic/Zionists related churches, three Roman Catholic churches and one Reformed Church in Zimbabwe (RCZ). The gender desks have reinforced safeguarding in faith communities by providing trusted and accessible support structures for survivors of gender-based violence (GBV).

Before the SASA! Faith project many faith communities did not have clear safeguarding, reporting or referral structures. Survivors or victims especially women were ordinarily reporting cases to Religious Leaders (RL) or to church leadership which was/is mostly dominated by men. Results from the Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) in August 2025 and the Rapid Assessment Survey (RAS) conducted in November 2025 showed that most women knew only the RL as the person to report GBV cases to within a faith community but because of the sensitive nature of some types of violence particularly sexual violence many chose to remain silent. One female congregant from Zion Church of God in ward 21 shared that *"Ndatofara tavawo nemadzimai anoonawo nezvekumbunyikidzwa kwedu obva atimirira kuti tiwane ruenzaniso tiri muchechi. Zvaisava nyore kuudza mufundisi wechirume nyaya dzakafanana nedzebonde, vazhinji vedu taingodzinyarara tichitya kunzi waakukumbira bonde kuvakuru vechechi."*

The idea of establishing gender desks developed after Community Activists (CAs) reflected on the RAS findings during the practice sessions and later engaged their RLs with support from project staff during the RLs' quarterly meetings. The gender desks were introduced as an additional safeguarding structure in faith spaces not to replace the RLs. Although some faith spaces were initially concerned about overlapping roles of the RLs and the gender desks continuous discussions on safeguarding, accountability and survivor protection helped church leaders to appreciate the need for multiple trusted reporting points.

The first gender desk was established in April 2026 with the remaining desks formed between May and June 2026. Each gender desk consists of one adult woman, one adult man, one female youth and one male youth who were selected by church members based on their integrity, confidentiality, empathy, gender sensitivity and knowledge of the referral pathway. This was also the first time young people and youths have been formally represented in church safeguarding structures. One RL from Kuratidzwa KwaJohane Apostolic Church shared that although the church had a gender committee before it was rarely used. After engaging with the CA the committee was revived and expanded to include two youth representatives.

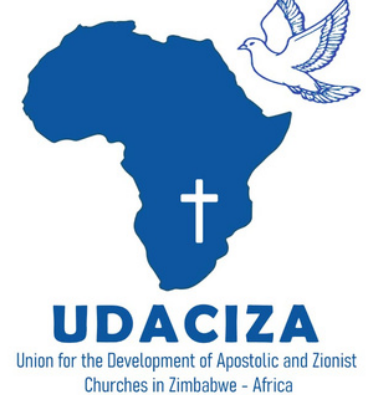
The gender desks now provide safe spaces for survivors to report violence, receive first aid counselling and be referred to services such as the Victim Friendly Unit (VFU), Department of Social Development (DSD), Ministry of Women Affairs Community Small and Medium Enterprise Development (MWACSMED), Musasa, Zimbabwe Women Lawyers Association (ZWLA) and health facilities. The desks meet monthly and they keep records of cases and referrals and facilitated 12 referrals between April and June 2026 altogether.

The change has also reduced pressure on RLs while increasing survivors' confidence and comfort to seek help. One Roman Catholic RL ward 19 explained that *"Chokwadi dzimwe nguva vanhu vanotya kuman'ara kumutungamiriri asi kwekuman'ara kukawanda zvinorerutsirawo vaPriest uye vanhu vanosungunuka."*

Young people have also embraced the initiative. One female youth Gender Desk member from Reformed Church in Zimbabwe ward 32 said *"Ndinotoona kukosha kwevakadzi nevarume zvakafanana nekuti neni semusikana ndiripo pakumirira kodzero dzevanasikana kuti vasambunyikidzwa."*

The success of establishing gender desks has created demand for more learning inside faith spaces. Five faith spaces requested further training on safeguarding and consent within marriage whilst two churches requested sessions for young people on drug and substance abuse, sexual abuse prevention, teenage pregnancy, child marriages and reporting mechanisms.

While gender desk members serve voluntarily they continue to strengthen safeguarding within their churches. Three additional faith spaces are now in the process of establishing gender desks while the remaining faith spaces are continuing using their existing gender-sensitive structures. This shows the growing ownership of safeguarding within faith communities and a shared commitment to ensuring that survivors have safe, trusted and accessible support systems.



Documented by Batsirai Zhou

www.udaciza.org.zw