Albinos hit by Zimbabwe's race divide

By Lewis Machipisa
BBC, Harare

At a time when race relations are strained in Zimbabwe, one group of people is finding itself shunned by both whites and blacks.

These are the more than 15,000 blacks with albinism, a hereditary condition that causes lack of pigmentation and leaves their skin white.

But now, besides being treated like lepers, albino women have increasingly been the victims of rape - a practice fuelled by myths that if an HIV infected man sleeps with an albino woman, he will be cured.

Outcasts

Treated like outcasts from birth, albinos are shunned by society and unable to find jobs, according to Felicity Mwamuka, the welfare officer of the Zimbabwe Albino Association.

Albino women have great difficulty finding husbands because people believe that an albino women will have albino children, she says.

"Most albino women are single parents."

"There is this traditional belief that if you sleep with an albino woman, you are cured of HIV," she says.

For Albino women who drop out of school at a young age selling vegetables at a street corner appears an easy option.
But even that is not easy, as people will not buy from albinos.

**Children**

Albino children also have trouble fitting in at school.

Gertrude Sumairi and her husband are both black, but 10 years ago, they had an albino child. "At first people laughed and I was shy to walk with my son. I had to stay in the house," she says. While Gertrude's husband accepted their son, many fathers of children with albinism suspect their partners of being unfaithful, resulting in divorce.

In the worst cases, people with albinism are regarded as a curse from God or a sign that ancestors are unhappy.

**Appeal**

To erase the stigma associated with albinism, the Zimbabwe Albino Association (Zimas) is trying to educate people about the condition.

Members of Zimbabwe's Albino community say they have received little support for their trust, set up in 1996.

When a donor sends aid, the association has difficulty obtaining it because of the high customs duties charged on imports into Zimbabwe.

To start with, the association wants the government to declare albinism a disability.

Albinos have problems with their eyes and many albino children drop out of school since their parents cannot afford to buy spectacles for them.

According to Zimas, life expectancy for albinos is 43 years compared to 57 years for darker Zimbabweans.
This is largely because of the high rates of skin cancer among albinos because of their sensitive skins.

Zimas also urges the government to cut duty on sun screen, so more albinos can afford it.