
Betty Makoni



“There is no greater setback for a woman than to grow up in a patriarchal system where girls and women are downtrodden and abused to the extent that those who perpetrate rape can go scot-free.”

Raped at the age of six — along with nine of her playmates, all by the same man — Betty Makoni learned early on that girls and women in her impoverished Zimbabwe town were helpless to protect themselves or one another from abuse. “In addition to the trauma of surviving the brutal act, we knew our mothers did nothing to have the perpetrators punished because of the dominant patriarchal society,” she said. “There is no greater setback for a woman than to grow up in a patriarchal system where girls and women are downtrodden and abused to the extent that those who perpetrate rape can go scot-free.”

A year later, in 1978, Betty watched her mother recoil in fear from a policeman’s suggestion that she seek legal recourse against her husband, who beat her daily. In that moment, an advocate was born. “Something snapped inside me,” she said. “I felt my inner being telling me that I would never suffer domestic violence in silence, and neither would I let other girls and women suffer the same fate.”

Although education for girls in the squalid, semi-rural St. Mary’s suburb of Chitungwiza was a low priority, Betty was determined to succeed. Through hard work, a refusal to fall into prostitution or to become a child bride, and help from the Roman Catholic Sisters who occasionally visited her village, Betty beat the odds. Despite the fact that she was responsible for the financial support of her siblings, in 1995 Betty graduated from the University of Zimbabwe and was offered a position as a teacher in Chitungwiza.

Soon after accepting the position, Betty launched Girl Child Network (GCN) — a club created to protect and empower young girls. The administrators at her school, however, were not supportive and she encountered opposition from other staff members. “I believe the teachers realized that they were going to face resistance from the girls they were used to abusing with impunity,” Betty says. “They were accusing me of teaching the girls to be ‘feminists.’”

Although denied financial support by the school, the club managed to support itself. “My community

never expected a body that would challenge a system of abuse of girls in schools and at home, forced marriages in religious and traditional settings, and denial of education to girls,” Betty says. “As in any situation where change is being effected, those who advocate for change are bound to face resistance.”

Within a couple of years, the clubs proliferated “like wildfire,” Betty says. “The strategy of empowering girls grew in popularity as others began to see that a concerted effort was needed to address the serious challenges and obstacles facing women and girls.” With time, traditional and local leaders began to take the lead in supporting GCN and many communities wholeheartedly followed. In nine years, GCN grew from one club to an organization today serving a membership of thirty-five thousand girls in nearly seven hundred clubs across Zimbabwe.

GCN’s primary work continues to be its direct services to girls in the most vulnerable sectors of Zimbabwe — the high-density suburbs and rural farming and mining areas. “It is necessary to empower girls at an early age so that they can have the necessary foundation to become future leaders,” Betty says. To achieve its goals, GCN uses all local and international statutes and human rights laws to ensure that girls are accorded the same legal status as boys.

Betty, who has three sons (one adopted) and a foster daughter, explains that her calling is therapeutic as well as politically and socially vital. In rescuing an eight-year-old girl from rape by her HIV-positive father, for example, Betty says that she rescued a part of herself as well.

“What never ceases to give me satisfaction,” Betty says, “is to see a young girl who passes through GCN claiming her rightful space as a human being, asserting herself in order to walk in the fullness of her potential.”