A Top 10 CNN Hero of the Year

Meet Betty Makoni, founder of Girl Child Network Worldwide

A courageous woman who helps empower girls, heal & support survivors of sexual abuse

By Stephen Ogongo

There are always people who hate those who dedicate their lives to the service of the needy. And they'll do everything possible to kill noble initiatives. But Mrs. Betty Makoni, a Zimbabwean gender rights activist and advocate is committed to disapprove those who want to kill her activities.

Betty founded the Girl Child Network Zimbabwe in 1998 and served as its executive director for over a decade. This is a community-based organization that champions the rights of girls and trains them to learn and defend their rights.

"We are forming a very big support group for women and girls, we meet weekly to find out who is being abused and how they can be assisted," Betty says.

Betty surely is not an ordinary woman. Raped as a child, she battled against all odds to obtain an education.

She established hundreds of girls' clubs across the country and touched the lives of 300,000 girls.

Betty developed a unique girl child empowerment strategy, the first of its kind to target the holistic individual transformation of girls as well as the transformation of society to support girls in their recovery, education and advancement.

The Girl Child Network Zimbabwe has been responsible for putting 4,000 child sex offenders behind bars - including a popular Harare church minister, Reverend Obadiah Msindo.

"You cannot use your taboos on little girls, you cannot rape women and we keep quiet, nobody has a right to beat another human being," she says.

Betty has been in self imposed exile after threats to her life by Zimbabwean youth militia. "I left Zimbabwe because my life was in danger as a result of my project being interpreted politically," she says.

Betty was put under surveillance and lived almost as a prisoner. Later on some youths went to her to demand for $3000 otherwise they would hand her over to be tortured.

After seriously considering their demand and declining to buy her life with $3000, Betty contacted an organisation in the US about her security and they helped her escape Zimbabwe in 2008. Betty, her husband and three children now live in the UK.

Her organisation recently scored major success when it fronted a fund-raising appeal for Nomatter Taremedzwa Mapungwana, an 18-year-old girl given months to live because of a five-year-old aggressive facial tumour. The tumour was successfully removed at a London hospital in October.

Betty has shared her empowerment model in Ethiopia, Swaziland, Malawi and South Africa, among other places.

International Girls' Empowerment Centre launched in UK

"We are here today to announce the launch of Girl Child Network Worldwide. It will be the centre of excellence and a hub of girls' activism as well as a centre of empowerment where the whole world will come and take best practices," this is how 11-year-old Annie Chatizemba opened the official launch of Girl Child Network Worldwide (GCNW) in the UK on 4th September 2009.

> ***"You cannot use your taboos on little girls, you cannot rape women and we keep quiet, nobody has a right to beat another human being"***
>
> **Mrs. Betty Makoni, President and Founder of Girl Child Network Worldwide**

In her keynote speech during the launch, GCNW President and Founder Betty condemned all systems in the world that harbour rapists and give them lenient sentences as this has perpetuated abuse of girls all over the world. She called on all to support girl child empowerment so that girls reach their full potential as women leaders. She asserted that we are still a long way from gender equality whether one is in the South or North. "Even the plane that takes me to Canada has male pilots only and meanwhile women work as air hostesses where they serve food (not that there is anything wrong with doing so) but beliefs, attitudes and practices bar women from making a breakthrough into male-dominated fields in science and mathematics where they could venture into careers such as piloting," she said.

GCNW supports and promotes girls' rights, empowerment and education by reaching out to girls anywhere who are economically deprived, at risk of abuse, subject to harmful cultural practices, or living in areas of instability.

"My life begins and ends where a woman is trying to get a solution," this is Betty's motto.

Betty named one of Top 10 CNN Heroes for 2009

Her new title is CNN Top Ten Hero for girls –Protecting the Powerless. To be selected a CNN Hero is not an easy task. From 1st January, CNN invited viewer nominations for 2009 CNN Heroes to be submitted through their website.

By the close of nominations on 1st August, they had received more than 9,000 nominations from 100 countries.

The CNN Heroes staff read each and every nomination and selected 28 individuals as 2009 CNN Heroes. A panel of CNN judges further reviewed this year's CNN Heroes, evaluating their accomplishment, impact, and personal motivation for service to others.

Twenty individuals were advanced to an independent Blue Ribbon Panel, which was asked to select the ten individuals honoured as the Top 10 CNN Heroes of 2009 and Betty made it here. Each of these ten will receive $25,000 in recognition of their work.

Explaining how being selected CNN Top Ten Hero has changed her life, Betty says: "Since being in self imposed exile after threats on my life by youth militia after activism around rape against girls in Zimbabwe, I became dislocated, my mission and vision distorted by the Government run state media and there is a time when I felt it heavy and sometimes wondered if all that I had built for girls in Zimbabwe just got taken away from me without a mark. I defended the girls all along but those who raped the girls I defended dominated key institutions and so took advantage of their powerful positions to continue abusing me and the girls whose rights I fought day and night to defend. It is apparent that had CNN not announced me as a hero then most of what I had built in Zimbabwe over the past decade would by now be water under the bridge."

Mrs. Betty Makoni (Right), founder of the Dalai Lama for her work empowering girls t

The CNN coverage of Betty's story restored her public image. "They came to me at a time I was in solitude and got me thousands of friends who understand, believe and appreciate what I do on behalf of poor, marginalized girls whose lives depended on me. As a result, my morale and confidence was boosted at a time when I needed it the most. Daily at least five friends come to join me on my Facebook so that they are closer to learn more and support more. I had only 21 friends before CNN came but now I have over 400 international friends and it looks everyone follows my story daily."

She is grateful to the CNN for playing a key Public Relations role on behalf of the poor girls. "Donations in cash and kind poured in and continue to pour in to girls in Zimbabwe and to date at least 12 funders will give GCN in Zimbabwe a total of $800,000. Within eight days of being announced as a CNN Hero and to date our Trust fund in UK has received $28,000 through Pay Pal. With the influx of funds we have channelled $21,000 towards girls' empowerment and education fund. Most girls were without basics such as uniforms, shelter and food. I sent 1000 uniforms, warm jackets, panties and other basics to poor abused girls who had never put on a new dress since they were born," she says.

Betty has a BA in English, Shona, Linguistics and a BA Fourth Year with Special Honors in Theatre Arts and Development, from the University of

Girl Child Network Worldwide (GCNW), was honoured by His Holiness the through the establishment of clubs for girls designed to build self-esteem and support learning

Zimbabwe. She is a passionate international speaker and advocate on issues affecting the girl child. She also serves on several boards of non-profit organizations in Africa and the US.

An online poll for the Top 10 CNN Hero is now underway at http://edition.cnn.com/SPECIALS/cnn.heroes/index.html.

The Top 10 CNN Hero who receives the most votes will be revealed on Thanksgiving night, during "CNN Heroes: An All-Star Tribute" and will receive an additional $100,000.

Betty needs your support in order to continue carrying out her extraordinary service to the community. One of the ways through which you can help is by voting for her to win this title. This will be of great support to survivors of sexual abuse in need of protection.

Vote for Betty Makoni to be the Top CNN Hero for 2009. Voting ends on 19th November 2009. You can vote for as many times for as long as you wish. Please vote for her here: http://edition.cnn.com/SPECIALS/cnn.heroes/vote/thank.you.html?ID=04lastRead

Betty Makoni: Child rapists should be imprisoned for life

What made you found Girl Child Network Worldwide?

I founded the Girl Child Network (www.gcn.org.zw) in Zimbabwe in 1998, together with 10 other high school girls and established a girls club in a local high school to combat the kind of terrible sexual abuse that I had undergone and that many girls were enduring from teachers, relatives, and even, officials. We marched across the country, organized campaigns to teach girls their rights. We helped vulnerable girls build empowerment villages to enable abused girls to interact with one another, heal and support each other.

How does your organisation help our girls and women avoid rape?

Girl Child Network Worldwide (GCNW) mobilizes girls into school clubs that enable them to learn their rights, prevent sexual violence and harassment, and become self-confident leaders. We intervene in the communities by helping build empowerment villages which provide medical, legal and educational services as well as access to police protection. We help to transform girls, to acquire assertive skills and to have informed choices about preserving their dignity in society and to exercise their right to life as they so wish, free from exploitation and male domination.

What's your message to rapists?

The world is awakening to your evil acts and I promise you that you will be judged harshly by society. I agree with calls to seriously look at the option of life imprisonment for those who rape minors. Just as we have different levels of punishment for other serious crimes, the same should be applied on those who rape children. It should be treated like first degree murder and have life imprisonment as part of punishment.

What's your message to women and girls who have been raped?

Be courageous to face up to the World, vow never ever to allow that horrific experience to be endured by another innocent soul, speak out, reach out and empower other women to be assertive and expose this devious inhuman injustice to bear the full wrath of the law.

How do you foresee the future of Girl Child Network Worldwide?

Girl Child Network Worldwide believes that our empowerment model, built in Zimbabwe in 1998, having reached some 300,000 girls, can be applied in many places. It's based on our experience that when girls receive fundamental support and encouragement from each other, gain an education, and learn their legal and human rights, they overcome a range of challenges, growing to fulfil their potential as human beings and as young leaders.

Girl Child Network Worldwide is the only organization to give general support funds to individual girls in communities where they lack the financial and human resources to mobilize and organize. We are expanding our efforts to other countries. The UK will be the international hub of training activities and fundraising based on the successes we have achieved in Zimbabwe over the past decade. Chapters will emerge in other countries, beginning with Uganda.

How is Taremeredzwa?

Tare has started talking and eating slowly through her mouth. This is a big achievement. She is recovering slowly, the doctor informed us that they have made a breakthrough in identifying the source of what is causing the tumor when they took some blood tests. This they must also deal with as a matter of urgency and so Tare will stay longer in the hospital. Expected time to heal and get all reviews and treatments as well as teeth implants is 3 months or even more. We must all be patient and give doctors all time to do what they know best ....Please note that each day Tare is in hospital we pay 500 pounds and encourage well wishers to donate through the Girl Child Network World Wide for Tare's cause.

Any other comment?

In many countries today, girls lack the freedoms and rights that automatically accrue to boys. Discrimination toward girls mixes with the harsh realities of survival into a dangerous alchemy that prevents girls' full development as human beings. In large numbers, girls are subject to sexual abuse and harassment, HIV/AIDS, domestic and military violence, trafficking into sexual slavery, and the denial of schooling.

As society, we need to introspect on our conscience and be confident to say out loud, 'What is it that I have done for the protection of the dignity of the girl child, that makes me feel proud to be human?' Support initiatives of the Girl Child Network World Wide. I was recently nominated CNN Hero for 2009 and am in the running for nominations online to be the Top CNN Hero for 2009. I am urging you to vote for me, for as many times as you can, for as long as you wish before the nominations close 19th November 2009. To vote visit: http://edition.cnn.com/SPECIALS/cnn.heroes/vote/thank.you.html?ID=04lastRead

How to donate to Girl Child Network World Wide for Tare's cause

Please visit the http://girlchildnetworkworldwide.org/
Donations can also be deposited in the following bank account:
Bank: Lloyds TSB
Branch: Southend-On-Sea
Branch Code: 309784
Account Name: Girl Child Network Trust Fund UK
Account No.: 03872848
SWIFT Code: LOYDGB21100