“All girls to remain behind soon after assembly”

This was one of the announcements at our assembly at Zengeza High School in 1999, and this day marked a beginning of Girl Child Network Club. It was the birth of empowerment, a voice for the girls. We all stood behind, giggling and a bit nervous. We were addressed by Miss Makoni. I have a vivid picture in my mind of her stating “Girls, I want you to know that you are all special and this harassment has to stop”. This has been a statement that I have recalled from that day on that “I am special” and I own my body so no one has a right to touch it without my permission.

Miss Makoni formed The Girl Child Network at a time when it was long overdue. She had the courage to do something about the problems we were facing. The school had witnessed a significant increase in the numbers of my fellow female students dropping out with unexpected pregnancies. After every school holiday a couple of girls would not return to school as they were either pregnant, nursing their newborn baby or married. This also coincided with a period, during which, some of the male teaching staff would seemingly abuse their positions to coerce girls into premature sexual activity, and sexual harassment. This was often underwritten by promises for preferential treatment in accessing scarce educational materials, and extra tutelage. In many instances, most girls in my position, who were less privileged by local standards and had a desire to achieve and do well, became more vulnerable and found themselves succumbing to this pressure from our ‘father figures’. Refusal to comply with the requests often made life so difficult for the girl child in class.

Some may wonder why the girls never reported these incidences. However, if anyone who has had the privilege to attain their primary or high school education in Zimbabwe or another African community, they can relate to the in-bred social and cultural hierarchy which so often stipulates that challenging adults in conversations or most instances sum mounds to disrespect. All this, accompanied by the fear and stigma, the unavailability of any emotional support systems for girls who were being emotionally and sexually abused was a major challenge to deal with then. During this time, even if one dared to share their concerns, the family might not have been readily receptive, with greater concern for maintaining a respectable social reputation and blameless family community standing. Whilst I never gathered the courage to answer back to any teacher, I became rebellious, which was not always very helpful, but it temporarily worked. Unsuspecting, the idea and introduction of Girl Child Network by Betty Makoni became one and all’s emotional salvation, offering us a supportive platform, and an empowering vehicle to express our daily challenges in confidence without fear of judgement or intimidation. Betty Makoni gave us a space to share our worries, problems without fear. This was a space for us as girls to grow and connect with each other.

Today, I stand proud whenever I reflect on how far Girl Child Network has come, since its humble beginnings in a high density suburb in Chitungwiza, Zimbabwe without any financial resources. Betty Makoni worked very hard to come up with strategies and ways to start effective intervention. Although Girl Child Network was initially confronted with a multitude of challenges due to the feminist talk, Betty managed to get a room for us to use for our meetings in 1999. The second year became more difficult after Betty Makoni had resigned as a teacher due to conflict of interests. We had to meet without Miss Makoni and securing a room became a problem and we ended up resigning to convening meetings in open school grounds, rock saddling for chairs. This became testament of how unwelcome the club was within some influential quarters. But I am glad with unwavering support the Girl Child Network continues to overcome these barriers and it has grown from strength to strength.

The inspiration that I got from being a member of Girl Child Network led me to pursue studies in Social Work. It was always my desire to safeguard vulnerable children and this is an integral part of my current job ensuring that they are not being abused in any way. Special thanks to Betty Makoni empowering me and teaching me to never give up on my dreams and to have the ability to stand up for good causes and what we belief is right. Yes the “Sky is the limit” and “powerlessness and silence go together. We should use our positions not as a shelter from the world's reality, but as a platform from which to speak. A voice is a gift. It should be cherished

and used." Thank you Betty for using your gift to inspire me and I am a product of your work. One of my colleagues from GCN said “empowered, dignified and independent” and well that describes me.

Linda Bikinesi in 2009 at a Women’s Centre in UK

Linda Bikinesi Lower Six at Zengeza High 1School in 1999