

GRANTEE PROFILES

GIRL CHILD NETWORK (GCN): ZIMBABWE

Empowering Girls to Resist Abuse, Achieve their Potential

Network Condemns Rape, Promotes Education, Prevents HIV/AIDS

At age 6, a local shopkeeper lured Betty Makoni and several young girls into his shop and raped them. At age 8, she saw her mother brutally assaulted by her father.

Both incidents were kept quiet.

"I pushed my mother to report the violence, but she put a finger to my mouth and said, 'Shush, you don't say that in public,'" she says.

But as a young high school teacher in 1998, Makoni couldn't remain silent.

She saw her female students dropping out of school, pregnant or infected with HIV/AIDS—often from rape, abuse, or coercion by male classmates, relatives, employers, neighbors, or teachers. Sexual violence is widespread in Zimbabwe, and as a result girls are twice as likely to be infected by HIV/AIDS as boys the same age.

To give girls a much-needed voice, Makoni put together an after-school girls' club with just nine students.

"We met regularly to share stories, and to find solace and solutions," she says.

That small circle has grown into a national movement; the silence they broke has turned into a roar heard across the country.

Today, 30,000 girls find the strength and skills they need to resist abuse and avoid HIV/AIDS in 500 Girl Child Clubs throughout Zimbabwe.

The Girl Child Network (GCN), founded and directed by Makoni, provides emergency services to more than 2,000 abused girls each year, raises community awareness, lobbies government to protect girls, and trains leaders for the 500 clubs.

For GCN's accomplishments, Makoni was recognized as one of CNN's 2009 Heroes and has received numerous international awards, including from Amnesty International and the UN Development Programme.

Firelight Foundation recognized the potential of GCN's grassroots approach early on, and became one of the network's early international donors in 2001.

Firelight provided start up funds and ongoing support for one of GCN's strategically located safe houses, called "Empowerment Villages." At each of these temporary homes, 60 girls each month receive medical care, legal aid, and counseling as they recover from abuse.

One abused girl walked 45 kilometers alone to a GCN Empowerment Village because she knew the help she needed was there.

About one in four girls who seek refuge at the GCN Empowerment Villages are HIV-positive. In 2002, GCN began providing post-exposure medications to prevent HIV.

As understanding of the benefits of the medication grows, rape is more quickly reported and HIV prevented, says Makoni.

Firelight has also supported GCN's 24-hour emergency services to girls who have been abused or are at risk of abuse.

"We accompany them to the police, social welfare agencies, counseling and other services," says Makoni. "So they don't have to look to would-be perpetrators, we provide school fees for dropouts and other material assistance."

The school-based girls' clubs—numbering 500 and still growing—are the backbone of the organization. The 30,000 girls meet regularly to learn about their rights, how to handle potential abusers, and how to report abuse. The clubs provide a forum to discuss their problems and set goals for a better future. Firelight has funded workshops for club members on HIV prevention and leadership skills, aimed at turning girls from "victims into leaders."

"A new breed of girls is emerging that is confident and fully aware of their rights," says Makoni.

The number of girls reporting rape to authorities has doubled in recent years, a sign of the climate change GCN has fostered.

The clubs also offer the girls income-earning activities that build self-esteem and raise money for school fees. The funds have prevented thousands of club members from dropping out of school. Firelight has provided start-up costs for girl club-run projects to raise poultry, start vegetable gardens, and sell school supplies and snacks.

The group's advocacy and outreach is designed to help create safe communities by raising awareness and promoting community-wide prevention. The organization has pushed for the prosecution of sexual offenders and works to foster a culture of accountability and environment of respect.

"Perpetrators who used to be shielded by patriarchy are being named and shamed," says Makoni.

GCN pressured the Zimbabwean media to report on abuse cases and trials and portray girls in a more positive light.

She points to two instances where community members dragged suspected rapists to GCN's Empowerment Villages and from there, handed them over to police, a sign of the impact the awareness campaigns have had on community attitudes.

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