

The Pixel Project is very pleased to share with you an interview held November 13, 2010 with Betty Makoni, the founder and CEO of [Girl Child Network](http://www.girlchildnetworkworldwide.org) (www.girlchildnetworkworldwide.org) and our blog editor, Crystal Smith.

Girl Child Network (GCN) provides safe and secure places and spaces for abused girls, run by professional social workers and based in rural communities. The organisation also provides small grants for GCN clubs and self-help projects to help girls survive.

This transcript contains the entire interview. Minor edits for clarity indicated in brackets.

Tell us about how Girl Child Network came to be.

GCN started in Zimbabwe at a very poor school in a high-density suburb... with a population of over one million, unemployment is almost 80%. I had, as a teacher, deployed to this school but also as a young girl, I grew up in the neighbourhood. What a coincidence that they deployed me to teach in a place where I was born and brought up. I still had some very tragic memories of being raped as a child, of being a child labourer at nine years when my mother died. Also, my mother lost her life in domestic violence. And also, I knew all the people in the neighbourhood.

But what really disturbed me when I went to my class—girls were not coming to school...or [school] was just a formality so that somebody can physically mark the register. So I knew there was a struggle that they were going through but it was not coming out. So I actually assumed another role of an activist in the class because I protested against teaching boys only, having understood as a child what we [girls] go through every day in order...to come in the class. You have to wake up at 3 AM, prepare food for everybody, warm up water for everybody, clean the house—by the time you are in school, you are already falling asleep.

So that violence, nobody even thought about it. So there was a lot of transference between myself and the girls I taught in class. They were a true reflection of what I went through, so that mirrored me as an individual and I said: “Academically, I am doing this like a job—at the end of the month, you get paid, you have to produce a report—but can a girl go anywhere far if I’m not honest to say the academic side is not working, the social side is not also working, so we need something extra.”

So that’s when I said to girls, instead of going to clubs where you are mixed with boys, just to come to a girls’ club...in my mind it was a club [that was] going to have girls only. So that became their space, their platform...Ten girls came. They were so shy. You know, in Africa if you choose to go to a space only for women, you are interrogated, [asked] why you want to be there, like a prostitute, like lesbians, girls who were planning to be rebels. So that was the first time myself and ten girls rebelled against patriarchal spaces; to say we won’t go where they are choosing each other as president. They’re in a club of boys—president, boy, vice-president, boy... so it was a perpetuation of the same gender stereotypes.

Then I said, if we don't challenge that at the school level, the girls won't go anywhere, because you know everybody is talking about advocating at the UN, advocating in Parliament, but what about the classroom? Because that's where we teach children. That's a window of opportunity to where we say, "No, no. This is not right."

So I knew girls were not going to say much when the boys are there because boys are already little patriarchs who command a lot of authority. So by taking them away from [boys], I wanted to create a space where I... "hardened" them without interference, without harassment, without being jeered—going to a place where every girl would cheer each other instead of jeering at each other. Jeering at each other takes away self-esteem.

When girls started coming to my girls' club, I said to them: "I'm not going to register who comes. I want all authority to be with you girls." ...So I kept private diary, I gave them a page... they wrote in there, they said, "Keep it for us, if we put it on paper it would be torn by male teachers and boys who are harassing us." So I kept all their membership in my handbag...Each time they were having a meeting, they would say "Ms. Makoni, can we have our register?" So that really showed me, little things showed acts of violence to the students—girls are afraid to write each other's name on a paper because it will be torn apart.

I later on called their parents to school and said: "This has never happened. My lesson today is also going to involve you as parents." Now my girls were actually going to penetrate the home, because that was another barrier. So when the parents came I told them, "No, I cannot teach half a class. If your daughter does not come to school, I will come knock your door. I'll knock it to an extent that you open it." So if I didn't see a girl at school, I would actually go knock because I told them. Most of them agreed with me. They really respected my position that things were not right, we shouldn't pretend. So girls started to get reading time, homework time, they started sharing the chores, they stopped sending girls to market, to pubs...where they sold things by the night.

Things started to change and I saw them liven up. And those are the first girls I started with and I already met a lot of them who are big women now.

So in 1999 we said: "Let's launch the girls' club. Let it be reality, let's not hide." We were denied a room to do that by the school head. He was a bully. We defied the order and we launched it only [on] Saturdays...I would facilitate a meeting place, even in my house, even in my kitchen, even in my bedroom, even in my sitting room. I would just say, "Let's meet."

So, that's how we started—sitting in a teacher's bedroom, sitting in a teacher's lounge, sitting in a parent's room, having parents now picking us...everybody coming to say: "Yes, we see what the girls are doing." And then later on when we declared the launch, every girl in the neighbourhood came because one girl who had been visiting another school went to share that it was Betty Makoni saving us girls. So the staff room became crowded by a lot of girls who were coming to say "We heard about a teacher called Betty. I am abused. Can she help me?"

So I literally abandoned my role as a teacher. And then I started going to police stations, to pubs where the girls were, doing marches, like the time when we did a 250-km march with my 500

girls [when we] launched in 1999. We walked up to all villages telling girls to come out. We started off as 10. It went onto 50, villages joined us, it went onto 2,000, then we were 5,000 by 2002, and as I speak to you now in Zimbabwe we have got a membership of 70,000 girls. So girls just multiplied like that.

So, from my ten-year experience, I learned quite a lot, such as, in Africa, the space for girls will never be there, but the vision must not die there. Neither can we just check our bags and go. I thought I needed a whole global movement. I think everybody, making noise wherever they can, to say: “Liberate the girls, lift them out,” because I had become a lone voice. This is where I actually started the Girl Child Network Worldwide.

Taking the experience of working in Zimbabwe ten years, I actually knew with all this [targeting], this victimisation that goes on in my country for girls’ rights defenders like myself, there is no way you can stay in the country and continue doing the work; there is no way you can be understood; there is no way you can be appreciated. So by decentralising it, we actually decentralised the targeting of individuals. Now they had to chase after the whole globe a movement that is saying, “It is not good.” So the model started going to Swaziland, it went to Botswana, it went to Zambia, it went to Uganda—it just started spilling out—USA, Canada, United Kingdom, where I am, and then we said, “Let’s form the Girl Child Network Worldwide, meaning we are everywhere, for every girl, but let’s mind that we are targeting Africa.”

Why do you think it is important to focus on girls?

I just want to quickly give you an example. [Two cars are] travelling on the road. One is travelling at 120 km/hour—that’s like a boy. Another one is travelling at 20 km/hour—that’s a girl. It means the car that is travelling at 20 km/hour has got a problem. In order for each to be with matching speed, we must do something.

So people don’t know that socialisation starts in the home—boys taking up the same patriarchal system, girls being the sexual object in the home, so [a life gets slowed]. We have to do a little extra bit and focus on girls so that they catch up. So you will see [that] working with girls does not mean we are not working with boys. We are focusing on girls in order for them to move at the same speed.

Equality, they cannot talk about it because they will never know it—the home does not give it. The school, as I told you, is even tougher, so we focus on them to transform them from being like a passive victim to the “masculine” qualities that we want because, if they remain so feminised, they cannot face the tough world. It’s all about standing tall. It’s all about girls doing critical analyses, analysing the status quo, knowing where they are and where they want to be. This is what we teach boys: a man is strong. We can say to the girls the same: a girl is strong.

So when they are young, that’s the only way we can instil everything in the girls, so that during their development into womanhood, it’s not too late to actually change a mindset that is so accustomed to being abused. It’s more use preventing a problem than curing it. You will see when we do programs with women, we are mitigating. When we focus on girls, we are preventing the problems we will later on face.

There is no way even the best psychologist in the world, or best therapist or best counsellor, can tell an old woman to leave abuse. She will tell you, I'll die here, because something was not done to her when she was a girl. It's much cheaper to instil skills in girls than to build shelters from violence. So, when we invest in girls, we are investing in women.

So...I strongly feel by focusing on girls, the calibre, the new breed of women I'm seeing coming from this network is a totally different breed from our mothers and grandmothers and us. These are women who never tolerate violence against them. They are economically independent. They do critical analysis. You know with a girl who's uneducated, anything can happen to her—anything—so our focus on girls in terms of social, economic, and political empowerment, is to ensure that whatever happened to us...that not happen to girls again.

And in any case, when we are looking at the 21st century, we are going to strike gender balance when we give more to girls than to boys. So that's why we focus on girls.

What do you hope for Girl Child Network to achieve for girls worldwide?

We want to build a critical mass. I've seen the girls here in the first world, they've got the potential, even to use IT to say no to sex objects. They can easily do that if they want. There's no way they cannot have a million girls on Facebook to say, "We don't want to see our bodies exposed like that."...So building a critical mass will utterly change a lot of things...Just one girl getting married anywhere in the world means a worldwide movement. If every corner is saying "Release the girl," it means they must release the girl.

So, now we are saying girls should not be spectators—they must be activists. You start activism not when you are thirty, but when you are below 18. So that's why we want every girl, everywhere to stand up...So, by building a worldwide movement, we are saying, abuse of girls or gender inequality knows no colour, knows no religion, knows no creed or culture. It's across the board. It must be fought equally.

Please tell us about what Girl Child Network has achieved so far?

What I can precisely say is one—just to create a platform for girls, which was not so much there. It was there, but people were not calling a spade a spade. People were half-doing it, but this time with a holistic package that has worked over ten years, and it keeps working in every country, we can say: "We are there." What remains now is to keep going.

And now we have the space, the choice and the voice. Everybody knows us. Everybody is out there doing something...In 1999 when I started, there was virtually nothing... But you know, when we see other organisations, saying we are doing something about girls, we also feel we have inspired people even though there is no formal acknowledgement from a lot of people we inspired, but we know most of the networks came out of GCN, which is very inspiring to us. That you do something and somebody replicates it...the replication of the model is something that has really made us think there is a bigger achievement.

And then, the number of girls empowered, and these numbers are multiplying on their own without me. I've lost count actually of the number of new breed of women we have in the world today. They are so scattered...So all my girls who have spilled over the world carried the model with them. And wherever they are, be it a university, be it in a family, be it in a school or a workplace, the same model keeps going. It means we designed something that will never come out of an individual, and normally we don't talk about such achievements. When we are talking about achievements, maybe we want to talk about the materials we have, not the beneficiaries. So every woman you see who is...empowered came out of the network some twelve years ago.

Another big achievement is that the girl is now a priority issue with a lot of policy makers. Wherever you go, everyone has created a department for girls. Ten years ago, I was a lone voice, but even with big, international organisations, they're doing girl power, girl effect, girl whatever. It is actually a whole international transformation for the better.

So I think we have actually influenced a lot of people in the world. Then, as GCN, we are coming almost from a village and now, we are at the centre of the globe. Rarely do you see an African organisation positioning itself globally like what we have done. I think we have occupied the space now and we have achieved whatever we wanted to achieve by centrally positioning ourselves, now we are going to roll it out. ...Nothing will stop us from showing who we are exactly. That's where all the excitement and all the hope, all the work is going to show.

Do you think violence against women has become the most pressing issue of our time? If so why and what can the layperson do about it in your opinion?

When we are looking at violence against women, we are also looking at the foundation we did not build when girls were young. VAW is a clear indicator that something went wrong in terms of girls' empowerment. So, it's a pressing issue, yes, because these are historical imbalances that are really imminent. If we did not educate women, if we started war, if women are not in leadership positions, if they are not advocates in the cause, if they are not defenders of human rights, yes that is a pressing issue now. So the lack of empowering girls was actually a build-up to this issue.

Now, the layperson can look at three things: their home, school, and community. Just look how your family is. If your family is still perpetuating the same gender stereotypes, it means that it spills in your school, that it spills in your community, and into your country. The basic unit of a country is the family. If a family has got some inequalities, an individual will never go anywhere. So a layperson can do simple things, like...looking at even their church as part of their community because a lot of people go to church...but if there are still churches who perpetuate violence and tell people that women are supposed to be under men, they were created from Adam's rib, and whatever they say, it means a lot of men feel like showing what the Bible is saying.

When it comes to the workplace, a lot of people don't even know their rights. So for the layperson I would suggest that we repackage all laws, put them in the simplest language, so that everybody has got a culture to know that if I am violated, it's not right—it must be a case. Most people blame themselves, for instance, when they are raped because there is nothing they

understand about laws protecting them. So we want to repackage all these complicated legal instruments that protect people and make sure that laws protecting women are like what a Bible is to a Christian. Wherever you are, you should refer to the law. And everybody who wants to perpetrate violence must know that the law will descend on them, just like the priority we have given, for instance, to traffic rules. Once you [break the rules], straight away you are penalised. There is always a camera that watches over you. Why don't we have the same cameras [figuratively] in our homes to protect people? So simple things that we do outside are not in our homes.

If and when we put all these homes, all these hospitals or whatever with [an] exit for emergency...In the home somebody does not know that when it's bad, I run away. And you know, symbolically, a fire extinguisher is only thought to put away the fire that we know; the fire is never a man who is going to attack you. We always think about them, not us. So it's that personal consciousness that isn't in the home that is as dangerous as anything.

Then for the layperson to know most wars are not being fought in the bush out there. The worst wars are being fought in our homes. So peace starts in the home not outside there.

[Asked for clarification as to whether the repackaging of laws is up to the layperson or legislators]. I think with a lot of laypersons, everybody has got access to education. If you are spoon fed and if you are given a fish and you never bother to take a rod to go fish, you become so disempowered. Let's encourage everybody to go, like these days, there is a lot on Facebook. If you look at the content people are taking and circulating...it's never a law you are passing onto a friend to say, "Look at this. Do you have such a thing in your country?" People are playing Farmville on Facebook instead of posting simplified laws to protect themselves in the home.

So I can say, to a great extent, those in the media can also help. Those on social networks can also help with music on laws, with poetry on laws, with art on laws, just as somebody coming up with a cartoon on a law can get a whole crowd following. So when we are talking about a layperson we are also talking about ordinary media of communication that will interest them. If it goes back to those in high office, it will remain complicated because they don't have the language of the ordinary.

We can have children's debates, we can have essay competitions, we can have musical compositions—a lot of things that we can do on the laws protecting people in the country.

You are now in exile from your homeland due to death threats - how do you continue your work? Where do you find the strength and the resources to do so? Most people would have crumbled long ago.

Maybe I can also explain the circumstances that led me to be in exile a little bit so that you understand and why I feel it should continue.

After doing a lot of work on protection of young girls against abuse, I got a lot of enemies—some enemies with high government profiles, very powerful, very rich. Sometimes you see them raping a young girl and then it becomes a real case and everybody becomes terrified to help, so I

would actually break through to help, and I did that with many cases. Of course, they ended up corruptly throwing out my case but it was a clear case.

And then I created enemies within the NGO sector when I started getting all these awards. Nobody wanted even to greet me. It was like petty jealousy. You know in Africa...when somebody looks as if they are thriving, there [are always those] that pull you down so I experienced that form of violence from fellow women and also a lot of men. So it became a situation where [they] teamed up together so they were encircling me.

And then, how they also influenced the donor community. That's when they framed the defamation case about stealing money. They actually started it in 2008 using a newspaper that was independent.

And there was a lot of working with CIO, like secret service, but when they started arresting me, in 2005 ... policemen always came behind my back and said: "Betty, you do such wonderful work, but somebody you work with really wants your head." And I go to my work and they told me that "Betty, somebody in government has told me that they want to kill you." And then on my phone I received death threats [saying]: "Who do you think you are. Today we are going to pick you up. You are going to be in trouble."

So I lived in, like, mental enslavement. I became also terrified and I had a family. My husband is an engineer. He is quite a quiet gentleman...Each time I got arrested, just like what you are seeing in Burma, being kept under house arrest, it became something also that affected my three little boys, because one day they saw me being dragged out of the bathroom naked by the police.

And what I did, I'm a very strong woman, all media people wanted also to write about this, [but I told them]: "No way. It will make my life worse in Zimbabwe." But in 2008, somebody told me, it was in March, "Betty, I love what you do, I work for the Secret Service, there is a plan to eliminate you. Please, my sister, take your bag only tonight and just cross the border." So I crossed the border to South Africa. That's how I survived.

I went on to rescue women who were being raped during the political violence of 2008. Somebody I worked with who was a Secret Service planted in the organisation sold me out and my case with the government became worse. So we had no choice but also to leave Botswana which was neighbour to Zimbabwe, and coincidentally that's when my husband got a job here in England. And when I came here, I said to myself, "I won't stop. I will continue working in Zimbabwe but I will take another strategy. I want this to be spread out so that they target no one, so that those who were planted to victimise me, defame me, and lie to my donors and all supporters stop it."

So, at the time when I was almost at the verge of collapse, when the world was almost taking me to be a fraudster, CNN came in and they said, "Somebody nominated you as a hero." And then they came to my house, I showed them all papers, I showed them virtually everything and they said: "Betty, the work you do is so important." And they sent their people to investigate everything, and I think I spent six months going through interviews and searching and what have you, then they said, "We found you very well. We have to put you to the top ten." So, out of

9,000 applications, I went to the top ten. When I became top ten, I said to myself: “I was almost thinking [did I do] anything wrong? This gang of people is mobilised so much against me, putting all sorts of things on the Internet—that was Mugabe’s Secret Service doing that. Then I said to myself, since I know myself to stand for truth, and since all the girls will know where it started from, [I began to] really understand, why should I give up? So when people from CNN started making little donations to me, that sustained me up to today; up to a stage where I formally registered the organisation now in England and I have been allowed to operate which means now I am on the go.

So I got good trustees, I got very good people to work with, I [worked with] good organisations like Ashoka. I was still on their stipend, they were paying me monthly, and basically, that’s what kept me going. And I’ll say [that] since I’ve gotten all the resources—people are giving me volunteer work and also people are making donations—I must put every resource to use. Even if it is still so small, I must make little grants to my girls, so I continued and I became the first girls’ fund in the world.

I now send them money [and] they do what they think can help them move forward, so that’s what I am now.

[Question: So they had actually accused you of misusing the money that you raised?] Yes, actually what they did, it’s quite a trick. If you are not in Zimbabwe, you might not understand it. What they do, they plant, like a...Secret Service. So she would actually pretend as if she is a disgruntled employee from within, so everything that you do, it actually hits a wall. It hits a brick and the world will say, “Ah but they work with so on and so on, so Betty must be wrong.”

So she goes to Mugabe’s regime to take orders to come and destroy...but I was lucky when somebody tipped me that it’s happening to you—leave now...So the thing is that they accused me during the whole CNN [event], taking letters from their donors...posting on the Internet, writing articles, regenerating them on the Internet, calling me a thief—I was called all names. You know there is no woman on Earth who works for a non-profit who has been persecuted like me. Nobody, psychologically, nobody.

And then, I said to myself, I’d better be steady. I am blacklisted, I am blackmailed, I am the “worst woman on Earth” but you know what, I stand by truth. During my leadership I was very, very clever. I said to myself: “Don’t touch a single cent when you are in Zimbabwe.” That’s how I survived because when the audit came out [by [KPMG](#), an international firm¹], after six months of being persecuted and I knew there was nothing, there was no case, they said: “No fraudulent activities, no evidence at all.” That’s when Oxfam kept quiet. [Oxfam Novib, a one-time funder of GCN, had asked for the KPMG audit.] They just disappeared from the whole drama. That’s when the government disappeared. That’s when everybody kept quiet. So I have enjoyed six months of peace now.

And then I had a girl with a tumour who I was looking after in my house. We had come from Zimbabwe for treatment...They started another media campaign on the Internet that this girl is now a pauper in the UK because Betty stole her money. It became another big issue. It went all over the Internet...even if you Google my name [you’ll see it], because also the trick is that,

when anybody now goes to Google, you get confused. So that's exactly the tactic, the torture tactic... that they took...because they couldn't get me physically in Zimbabwe. So they do that periodically, they post such emails so that [people] will see it and you can actually see it from the news site that they are all Zimbabwe.

So, you know, those who trusted me that I mean well are still with me. Those who fell to Mugabe's regimes, articles on the Internet, left me but, when they left me, they also left disparaged children alone. Mugabe is using the Internet to target me, to target many other human rights defenders and it's actually a tactic they use. It's so violent. It's so violent you know, when everybody deserts you and calls you a fraudster, so that's what they do. [They use it everywhere] And then people say: "Why are you calling me that?" Then they say: "Look at this article." They don't say: "Look at this audit." They say, "Look at this article"—the one they have written is what they give out.

So, as Pixel Project I really want you to also think about people coming from such countries like mine, who are being persecuted through cyberwar, cyberspace, like somebody uses the Internet with Google to target you. That's the form of violence that I experience from the regime in Zimbabwe myself...The thing is also to divert you from your work. Instead of talking about GCN, they will know that you end up explaining to people that you are not a thief. It's a strategy. So all my energy has been spent trying to explain to donors that I'm okay, I did nothing wrong. So everywhere you are going, they will put you in a court. That's a violence that is worse. And how they infiltrate donors, it's so strange. So we are not safe on Facebook. We are not safe anywhere. They stalk you. Everywhere you are stepping, they are there.

Can you tell us about the film *Tapestries of Hope*? How was it received? Where can people watch it?

[Regarding where to watch it] I think I would give [the question] to the director, Michealene Risley because now *Tapestries of Hope* is with distributors.

I wouldn't want to...say I've got full details, but so far I've received quite some positive messages of people wanting to go to Zimbabwe and volunteer. I've not received so much donations because they were directed to *Tapestries of Hope* in the USA, but from what I can gauge is that a lot of people have sympathy for the girls and they want to do something.

It means, now that we have launched our organisation, we are going to join everybody in whatever they are thinking of doing in terms of their helping. So that's all I can say. And, yes, there are going to be DVDs, so Michealene [the director] will formally announce that.

But it is believed that in one day, about 20,000 people watched it and the requests for viewing it are so many worldwide—I think they are still at the planning stage of how that can be done.

¹ Link to story available at http://girlchildnetworkworldwide.org/news/news?subaction=showfull&id=1284999067&archive=&start_from=&ucat=2&