



# Betty Makoni

## WHY IS BETTY A NOMINEE?

Betty Makoni has been nominated as WCPRC Decade Child Rights Hero 2009 for her long struggle for girls in Zimbabwe to be freed from abuse and to have the same opportunities in life as boys. Through the Girl Child Network (GCN) Betty has built three safe villages for particularly vulnerable girls and started 500 girls' clubs with 30,000 members, mostly in rural areas and in poor townships. Betty saves girls from child labour, forced marriage, abuse, trafficking and assault. She gives the girls food, clothes, medical care, a home, the chance to go to school, and safety. Above all, she gives the girls courage to demand respect for their rights. Tens of thousands of girls have found a better life because of Betty's work. She and GCN speak out on behalf of girls in Zimbabwe by constantly encouraging the government to take care of the country's girls. But not everyone approves of Betty's struggle. She lives dangerously and is constantly being threatened for her work.



**Bang!**

**Betty Makoni awoke with a start. It was the middle of the night in the poor neighbourhood of Chitungwiza outside Zimbabwe's capital city, Harare. She heard it again: Bang! And again: Bang! The children began to cry. Just a few metres from Betty's bed, masked men were breaking through the front door with an axe.**

**Fighting for girls' rights can be dangerous!**

One of the men pointed at Betty and shouted, "We're going to kill you! You're the woman that causes nothing but trouble for us!"

Betty and her children were terrified. When one of the men reached out for her one-year-old son, Betty panicked.

"I thought they were going to kill him or kidnap him. But we were lucky. When they saw that my husband was home they ran away."

That was just one of the many times Betty's life has been in danger because of her struggle for girls' rights.

But she doesn't give up.

"I know myself how it feels to have your rights violated. That's why I keep going!"

### **Terrible man**

Betty's own story starts in the poor neighbourhood of Chitungwiza.

"My childhood was terrible. My father beat my mother almost every night. Mum couldn't manage, so I had to start helping out at home at a young age. When I was only five years old I used to clean and cook and carry my younger siblings on my back at the same time. Both Mum and Dad

used to beat us. I never felt safe."

Just like many other girls in her neighbourhood, Betty had to start working. From the age of five she walked around selling vegetables and candles every evening.

"While us girls were working we could see the boys our age playing."

When Betty was six years old, something awful happened.

After several hours selling their goods, she and some friends arrived at their last customer, who owned a little shop.

"Once we were all inside



the shop the man suddenly locked the door. He brought out a knife and said that he would kill anyone who screamed or tried to resist. Then he turned off the light. Everything went pitch black. We were scared to death but we didn't dare call for help. He raped us, one after another. In the end we managed to get away. Everyone ran home, and we never talked to each other about what had happened."

"When I got home Dad wasn't in and Mum was asleep. I could see that they had been fighting again. I cried silently so that I didn't wake anyone. I felt dirty and totally abandoned."

Despite what had happened, Betty continued to work every evening. When she started school she used some of the money she had earned to pay her school fees. It wasn't always enough, and Betty was often sent home from school because she couldn't pay.

She often thought about how wrong it was that a grown man had hurt her so much. She also thought about how wrong it was that her mum was always getting beaten.

**Since Betty and 500 girls walked 200 km, from village to village, many new girls' clubs have been started.**

### The girls' club

When Betty was 24 she started work as a teacher. She saw how hard things were for girls. As soon as a family had difficulty paying their children's school fees, it was always the girls who had to quit school while their brothers carried on. Soon the girls in Betty's class started to talk to her about their problems. They told her about the male teachers who took advantage of them and about how hard it was for them to dare to speak up when there were boys around.

"Then I suggested that we girls should meet up and talk about things that are important to us. I suggested that we could have a club where girls take care of each other and help each other if something bad happens to one of them. A club where they would grow strong and dare to demand the same rights in life as boys. They thought it was a great idea. There were ten of us who started meeting up a couple of times a week."

"Slowly but surely, girls who had been subjected to rape and abuse started to come forward and tell us about it. We supported the girls and helped them to pluck up the courage to report the crimes to the police."

## The Girl Child Network doesn't let anyone down!

"At the beginning the idea was that all the girls' club members would pay 10 US cents every year. But that was too much for many of the poor girls in the rural areas, who need the girls' club more than anyone else. So that we didn't let them down, we decided to stop charging a fee. Every club tries to earn a bit of money to help those in need. Some grow and sell vegetables, others make baskets and sell them," explains Betty.

It wasn't long before girls' clubs started up at other schools, first in Chitungwiza and then all over Zimbabwe.

"In 1999 I decided to start the Girl Child Network (GCN) so that all the girls' clubs could support each other."

"That same year I did a 200 km walk with 500 girls, out in the rural areas. We walked from village to village telling people about girls' rights and about what we do at our girls' clubs. At night we slept on floors in village schools. We were on the road for 17 days and after that there were loads of girls



**Betty (left) the year she started working.**





## Safe village goats

In the safe villages, the girls learn to grow vegetables and to take care of goats and chickens.



who wanted to start their own clubs. Today there are 500 girls' clubs with 30,000 members all over Zimbabwe!"

The clubs report to the Girl Child Network if anyone has been raped, had to quit school, or been forced to get married or start working. If anyone needs help to pay for school fees, clothes, shoes or food, all the other girls in the group try to help them out. If they can't manage it, they contact Betty.

### Safe villages

Betty soon realised that many of the girls who were saved from abuse, child labour, forced marriage and rape needed a safe place to

live. Often the girls couldn't return to their families. Since Betty made sure that many of those who committed crimes ended up in prison, she was afraid that they would come back to take revenge on the girls later. So in 2001, the first 'safe village' was created. Since then two more villages have been built in other parts of Zimbabwe.

Since Betty started the first girls' club in 1998, tens of thousands of girls have been given the chance of a better life. Betty never hesitates to point the finger at people who treat girls badly, even if they are powerful politicians. She has made plenty of enemies and has had lots of

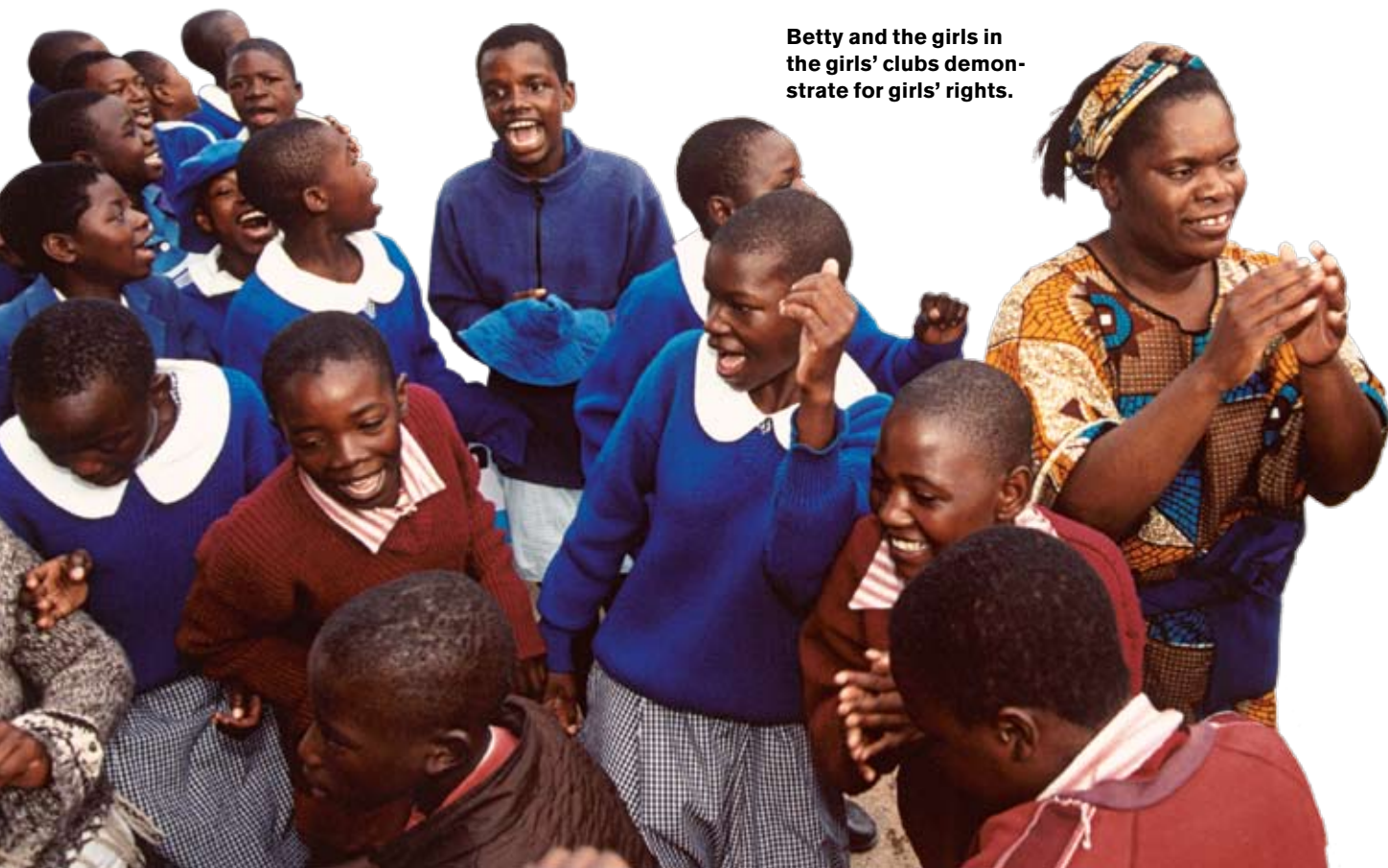


**Betty has been threatened many times and her life has been in danger because she fights for girls' rights.**

threatening phone calls in the middle of the night. Cars follow her around and the police carry out raids on her office. Betty has to have people around her to protect her at all times. Her children can't even walk to school on their own, as she is afraid something could happen to them.

"My dream is for Zimbabwe to be a country where boys and girls have the

same opportunities in life. Every day I get about ten phone calls from girls who have been raped. It's still hard for girls to go to school. They get married off or forced to work instead. As long as what happened to me when I was little continues to happen to girls, I'll keep fighting for them!"



**Betty and the girls in the girls' clubs demonstrate for girls' rights.**



# “Betty saved my life!”



“I’ll never forget when I saw Tsitsi for the first time. She was lying on my sofa and looked so small and scared. She was eight years old, and had been beaten so badly that she had deep wounds on her back. I thought she was going to die,” says Betty.

## Tsitsi

had lived with her mother in a little house in Chitungwiza but she knew her father, who sometimes gave them money. She liked her father, but she loved her mother.

When Tsitsi was in first grade, her mother fell ill.

“I cooked food and helped my mum as much as I could, but one day she just died. That same evening, Dad came and took me back to his house.”

For the first little while, Tsitsi’s father was kind.

“He didn’t really comfort me, but he gave me food and helped me so that I could keep going to school.”

After a couple of months, when Tsitsi’s father became ill, everything changed. He began to have difficulty paying the rent. It became hard even just to buy food and he

blamed Tsitsi for all the bad things that happened.

### My own father

“Dad got angry about nothing. He would beat me as a punishment. He used his belt or a stick, and hit me on the back, the chest... everywhere. Dad beat me almost every evening.”

One evening things got even worse than usual.

“I had just gone to bed when he told me to come and lie down on his bed. At first I didn’t understand what he meant. Then I realised that he wanted to do bad things to me. When I refused, he hit

### Remembers her mum

“My mum, who was a seamstress, taught me to sew. I think of her every time I sew. I miss her so much.”

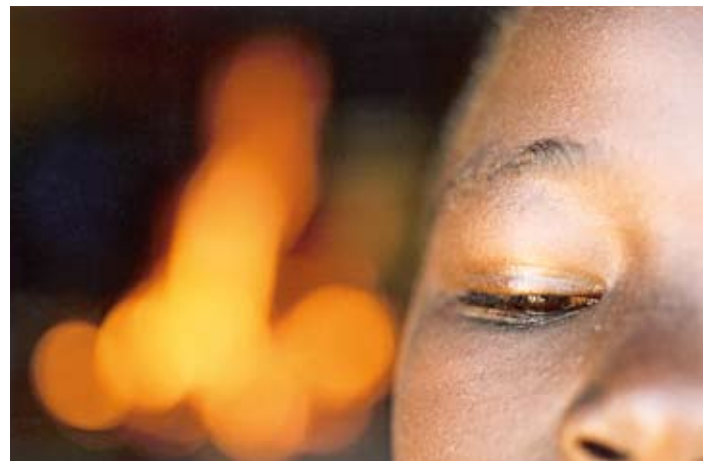
me with an electrical cable. At the same time, he held up a knife and said that he would kill me if I screamed. I couldn’t defend myself, and in the end he did it. My own father. The next night he did it again. And the next night, and the next...”

Finally Tsitsi told her teacher, who called Betty Makoni straight away. That very afternoon, Girl Child

Network came and collected Tsitsi from school.

### Finally safe

“Betty saved my life and I love her! She took me to hospital and took care of me. But for the first while I was often sad and I had nightmares. At first I lived in a ‘safe house’ in Chitungwiza, but then I moved here to one of Betty’s safe villages. Those







...the girls in the safe village sweep the yard...

## Together...



...and wash the dishes.



"Every afternoon after school we sit around the fire and tell stories and sing. I love sitting here with the other girls," says Tsitsi. Join in the fun around the fire in Tsitsi's village at [www.worldschildrensprize.org](http://www.worldschildrensprize.org)



of us who live in the village do everything together. We play, clean, wash the dishes, sleep, go to school... everything! All of us have had a hard time and we understand each other."

"I love playing with the others. It helps me forget everything that happened with my dad. It's the same in

school. I concentrate on learning new things there instead of thinking about the past. When I miss my mum and feel sad, I go and talk to one of our three village mothers who take care of us. Most of all, they give us love. I feel happy and safe here." 🌍

### Newspaper ball

"It only took a few minutes to make this ball. I pressed newspaper into a bag. We use this ball when we play bottle ball," says Tsitsi.

## Play bottle ball!

Bottle ball is played on a sand pitch. An empty plastic bottle is placed in the middle of the pitch. Two teams, with as many members as you like, play against each other. The first team is divided into two groups who stand fifteen metres apart with the bottle in the middle. They are the 'outer team' and they throw the ball back and forth to each other. Between them stand the 'inner team'. Anyone who gets hit when the outer team throws the ball is out. When everyone in the inner team is out, the outer team has won and the teams swap places.

The inner team can rescue members of their team who are out. When the outer team throw the ball, someone from the inner team has to catch it, without being hit anywhere else. The person who catches the ball throws it as far away as they can. While the outer team run to fetch the ball, the inner team fill the plastic bottle with sand and then quickly pour it out again. If the inner team manage to do that before the outer team have brought the ball back, then they have rescued everyone who is out, and they can continue the game!



### Loves high-rises

"My favourite place is our capital city, Harare. I like the high-rise buildings and there is electricity there. The streets are lit up and the people who live there can watch TV. We don't have electricity yet in the village."

