

The Girl Child Empowerment Strategy

Betty Makoni*

Abstract

This paper discusses the work the Girl Child Network (GCN), a global organisation that champions the rights of the girl child. The focus of the GCN's work is the low status enjoyed by women in general, and girls in particular, within society. As efforts to improve the status of adult women have proven futile, young women are the focus of attention of the GCN. The Girl Child Empowerment Strategy has been the focus of the work of the GCN for the past eight years. The strategy aims to create a clear path to becoming a leader instead of a victim. In addition to programmes for aiding the individual girl child, the GCN also seeks to engage policy makers to develop a legal framework for protecting survivors of domestic violence. The Girl Child Empowerment Strategy and the work of the Girl Child Network have been replicated in localities all over the world with demonstrable success. The empowerment strategy is presented in this paper as a successful model for affecting lasting positive changes on gender inequality issues including domestic violence.

1. Introduction

This paper discusses the work the Girl Child Network (GCN), a global organisation that champions the rights of the girl child. I and ten of my students founded the GCN as a club in 1999 in Zimbabwe, which was subsequently registered as an organisation in 2001. Its various successes have led the GCN model to be applied beyond Zimbabwe and in many other countries.

I was deeply influenced by my experiences of abuse as a child and the many incidents of gender-based violence in the community where I grew up. As such, GCN was born out of the helplessness and hopelessness of the experience of being a girl in Zimbabwe. As an organisation, it seeks to assist girls with their quest for emancipation from the socioeconomic abyss in which they find themselves. Addressing the low status of women and girls in society has been the primary focus of the GCN's work. To this end, the organisation has designed programmes geared towards improving the position of women and girls and ensuring they are able to take action on public and private matters in order to address their plight.

* Betty Makoni is a gender activist, founder and director of Girl Child Network Zimbabwe (GCN) and Chief Executive Officer of Girl Child Network. She holds two Bachelor of Arts Honours Degrees from the University of Zimbabwe and is trustee of the Global Network of Christians, based in the UK. She has received eighteen global national and global awards and the most recent is the CNN 2009 Hero award for protection of the powerless.

Their low status on the socioeconomic ladder has made girls and women vulnerable to domestic violence in the domestic sphere. Domestic violence has been perpetrated against women because perpetrators of this violence are able to convince themselves that they can do anything to women with impunity. As a result, child sexual abuse, early and forced marriages, virginity testing, pledging of young girls to appease avenging spirits and forced child prostitution within child-headed households are all too common.

Girls are vulnerable to gender-based violence because the age factor in addition to gender further subordinates them in society. Daily life can be harsh for girls because of the many acts and attempted acts of violence they experience because of their age and gender. It should also be recognised that the girl child is vulnerable because, as a child, she is entirely dependent on adults for survival who can choose to provide or not to provide for her basic needs.

The low representation of women in the political, social and economic spheres is both a cause and a symptom of the widespread subordination of women in Zimbabwe. The GCN has observed that the under-representation of women in public life has occurred because of the many hurdles they encounter, for which there is not enough support. Many women become pregnant, become infected by HIV and AIDS, and do not have sufficient access to education, yet most communities accept these hurdles as normal parts of life. Equally unfortunately, reproductive health and sexual rights are not priorities in these communities.

There is a serious gender imbalance in all spheres of life as girls and women do not feature in the process of development. Efforts to improve the status of adult women have proven futile as it is very difficult to instil and facilitate the means for empowerment at an older age. Therefore, the young woman must be the focus of attention. However, girls are neither just women nor just children, and therefore to confront issues affecting girls requires a unique set of tools that can be applied specifically to them. The GCN aims to provide and instil within young women the means for elevating their social status. Through education, knowledge and leadership skills, women are able to create a 'space' where they are able to exercise their rights in groups. These tools provide young women with the motivation and social savvy to confront the system of patriarchy, which has perpetuated violence against women for years. By giving young girls a voice and a space, the GCN provides them with the necessary strategies to be aware of and claim their rights and thus participate in the process of development.

2. The problem

In most African societies, there is gender inequality in all spheres of life, particularly within the home, school and community. Patriarchal structures are deeply rooted. Change in attitudes, beliefs and practices are not guaranteed unless the girl child is empowered to stand up and demand her rights, respect and space.

Some very serious social problems that prevent girls from advancing in society can be identified by making a few observations about the attitude of Zimbabwean society towards women and girls:

1. In many places, parents believe it is more advantageous to have sons than daughters.
2. A case of five boys indecently assaulted by a teacher took two weeks to be heard in the courts, while another case of 32 girls who were sexually abused at school took more than a year to be heard.
3. During the domestic violence debate in Parliament, Zimbabwean parliamentarians said that in the eyes of God, men and women are not equal.
4. There is a Ministry of Women's Affairs, but it is very poorly funded compared to other government ministries.
5. Women occupy only around one-fifth of key decision-making positions in Zimbabwe.

In addition, the incidence of HIV and AIDS in Zimbabwe is 60% amongst girls aged 13 to 25 years, compared to 10% amongst boys of the same age. Ninety-three per cent of girls are sexually abused in Zimbabwe compared to 7% of boys. One in four girls out of 6,000 believed to have been raped is infected by HIV and AIDS. Due to early forced marriages, the widowed, orphaned girl child has become a common sight in most poor communities. The youngest rape survivor in Zimbabwe is a day-old baby. There was a big outcry in Zimbabwe when one 16 year old boy married a 45 year old woman, compared to hundreds of girls under 16 years of age who are married in some apostolic sects to men of 70 years and older.

All of these factors contribute to the ongoing marginalisation of women and girls in society, making them vulnerable to domestic violence and abuse.

3. The work of the Girl Child Network

A key aspect of the work of the GCN is responding to individual cases of domestic violence, providing girls with a way out of these situations before they become worse. The Girls at Risk Support Programme operates the organisation's Survivor Protection and Support Strategy to address the concerns of girls who are at risk. The programme offers legal, educational and psychosocial support to girls and their families. It seeks to both prosecute perpetrators of domestic violence and rehabilitate victims, and provides 24-hour emergency services for abused girls. It also undertakes rescue missions for potential abuse victims with the help of the police, social welfare agencies and other relevant organisations.

In addition to working with individual cases, the GCN has operated programmes with a larger ambition: to address the broader social problem of domestic violence. The GCN has developed several strategies to prevent domestic violence and to rehabilitate victims as well as preventing recurrence. The GCN also seeks to build the capacity of domestic violence survivors to become victors instead of victims. The GCN programmes and strategies are the organisation's products, and they are tailored to address the dynamics, dimensions and impact of domestic violence on girls and women while at same time helping communities respond to the epidemic of domestic violence. These programmes are: The Girls' Empowerment Clubs; Community Development and Empowerment; Advocacy and Lobbying; Information, Documentation and Dissemination; Girls At Risk Support; and the Legal, Governance and Democracy programmes.

Girls' Empowerment Clubs, one GCN programme, has shown that if girls are empowered to confront cross-cutting issues such as gender, HIV/AIDS and human rights, they will be able to prevent and to fight domestic violence in all spheres of life. The girls' activities have contributed to a marked reduction in the number of reported cases of domestic violence in Rusape and Chivhu, as people, including perpetrators, have felt the impact of girl child empowerment. In other areas, case reporting has increased as people shun the culture of silence that trapped the victims of domestic violence.

Girls Empowerment Villages (GEV) have been revered models for rehabilitating survivors of domestic violence. These forums provide the resources for many of these survivors to become champions in the fight against domestic violence. One child survivor represented the GCN at the 2006 XVI International AIDS Conference in Toronto, while another GCN alumnus has set up a community-based organisation that helps women survivors to confront the challenges that come from having experienced domestic violence. The GEVs have demonstrated their effectiveness by making communities aware of the various dimensions of domestic violence and by mobilising community support to eradicate it.

Beyond these programmes, the GCN has also sought to engage policy makers to develop a legal framework for protecting survivors of domestic violence. It raises awareness of potential protection measures that can be used by women, and it delivers information about rights in simplified legal statutes and information packets.

4. A girl child empowerment model

The GCN targets a membership of over 30,000 girls aged 0 to 18 years, with the network dominated by the 9 to 13 age group, who make up 60% of the membership. The Girl Child Empowerment Strategy has been the focus of the work of the GCN for the past eight years. The strategy aims to create a clear path to becoming a leader instead of a victim. Girls need a free space to bring personal experiences of abuse to the attention of others so that the group may be able to work through their troubles together in a mutually supportive manner. These groups collectively gain confidence as well as knowledge on the gender and human rights dimensions of their struggle. The strategy should seek to bring the same notion of empowerment to girls that have not experienced abuse as well.

Empowered girls must be kept motivated through practical projects like club activities, peer elections, gender equality debates and exchange programmes with men and boys. Girls should have community-organising experience to challenge the notion of leadership as a male domain. Mass mobilisation of empowered girls into a national girls' movement helps to create a *culture of pro-action* – as opposed to reaction. Empowerment of girls transforms their role in the fight against gender-based violence. The world has created plenty of posters and pamphlets but the world has not turned this information into real knowledge. Girls transform information into knowledge through their social networks and use it to the best of their advantage. Also, girls develop the courage to name and shame rapists, rather than feeling shame themselves because they were raped. Speaking out should be the new culture using whatever medium it may be: song, dance, poem or journal.

The GCN empowerment strategy has revolved around its programmes, which have been geared towards creating space for girls to support and strengthen each other. The work of the GCN has included: (i) setting up and managing girls clubs in schools so as to create platforms where girls meet and go through the various stages of empowerment, (ii) promoting information, knowledge and skills sharing as well as giving career guidance and scholarships, (iii) educating girls on their legal rights, reproductive health issues and HIV/AIDS, and (iv) facilitating peer-to-peer counselling and leadership and giving guidance on how to start and run girls' clubs.

A girl child does not exist in isolation. There are men, women and boys whose attitudes, beliefs and harmful cultural practices can undermine the empowerment of the girl child. Communities are able to support girls by setting up Girls Empowerment Villages, a programme facilitated by the GCN. When whole communities empower themselves to confront gender violence, a culture of gender equality is created. Many community organisations have been formed to coordinate efforts to reduce the impact of HIV and gender violence on the girl child and this has had a lasting impact on the whole community. In this way, communities develop a sense of responsibility for the survivors.

The GCN has always worked to respond directly to the plight of the girl child. The mandate of the GCN is to ensure their empowerment. However, the situation of the girl child is largely not of her own making. To address this fundamental fact, the GCN has made sure that those persons and institutions with a say in her future wellbeing work to achieve the empowerment of the girl child. The GCN conducts capacity building for entire communities to enable them to create and sustain programmes and structures that will be conduits for future programming and development. Sample programmes include: entrepreneurial training so communities can generate enough income for girls' education; training for members of the Girl Child Network Monitoring Committees that meet monthly to assess child abuse and bring perpetrators of abuse to village courts and to the police; Community Group Counselling training; HIV/AIDS education; platforms for the inclusion of men and boys; and community implementation of the National Plan of Action on Orphans and Vulnerable Children.

5. Supporting the Empowerment Strategy

The success of the girl child empowerment model at the individual and local levels must be accompanied by action at the regional and national levels as well. The GCN aims to engage all stakeholders. This is accomplished through a range of programmes including: advocacy and lobbying, information campaigns, alliance building and long-term strategic planning.

5.1 *Advocacy and lobbying*

Most of the problems that girls encounter have their roots in policies, laws and socio-economic structures that undermine girls' rights and impede efforts towards their empowerment and development. To ensure the eradication and minimisation of obstacles that hinder the development of the girl child, the GCN has developed the advocacy and lobby programme as the mouthpiece of the girl child by: (i) lobbying policy and law makers to formulate, amend and implement policies and laws that protect the girl child, including those that address gender

equality, HIV/AIDS, orphan care, sexual offences, and harmful traditional and religious practices; (ii) conducting extensive community-based sensitization on existing laws and policies that protect the rights of women and children and engage in media debate and publicity; (iii) engaging communities, schools, government, and policy makers in advocacy and lobbying for the eradication of practices which impede the girl child's full physical, emotional, spiritual growth and development; and (iv) popularizing laws, policies, and regional and international legal instruments that promote and protect girls' rights in the home, school and community.

5.2 *Information, documentation and dissemination*

One major problem that has contributed to the vulnerability of the girl child has been the lack of information on children's rights. To address this deficiency, the GCN has developed a culture of documentation and dissemination of information from girls to other stakeholders and vice versa. In 2005, the GCN established information cafés along with the GEV's, where clubs deposit all the information they collect on girls' issues in order that it can be collectively analysed. This information is then compiled into resources that can be referred to by governments, media, donors and policy makers. The programme seeks to document empowerment activities carried out by the GCN, collate data and statistics relating to gender based violence and evaluate the impact of GCN programmes. Examples of best practices are shared with funding partners, stakeholders and the girls.

6. International success and the future of gender equality

The Girl Child Empowerment Strategy and the work of the Girl Child Network have been replicated in localities all over the world from Ethiopia to Sweden. It has enjoyed demonstrable success in South Africa, Uganda, Swaziland, Kenya, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, USA, Canada, and the UK.

In each of these localities, there is a clear acknowledgement of the value brought to whole communities, via the multi-pronged approach to combating domestic violence that has had lasting effects on a number of societies. Moreover, the GCN story has encouraged people to see gender inequality as a human rights violation. In recognition of these successes, the GCN has received numerous awards for its approach to protecting the rights of the girl child, including the prestigious UN Red Ribbon Award.

More international reach is needed, however. There are estimates that gender equality may be achieved in 2490, meaning in nearly 300 years.¹ It is believed that this 300-year period can be reduced to 30 years, if the success of the Girl Child Empowerment Strategy is taken as a yardstick. The 30-year estimate is based on the changes in public perception that have occurred in response to the GCN's work with roughly 70,000 girls around the world. If this trend could be effected globally, the period within which gender equality could be attained would be much shorter than the 300-year estimate.

¹ N. Fatima, 'Empowering women to enhance economic development', *Business and Finance Review*, available at <http://jang.com.pk/thenews/mar2010-weekly/busrev-08-03-2010/p3.htm>. Last access 31 May 2010.