

Introduction

Across the world, the children who are missing out on school continue to be those who are most marginalised in their communities. 54% of them are girls, and around half live in fragile or conflict-affected states. These countries receive only a small proportion of aid to education, partly because they are commonly more difficult for donors to work in, because aid is not best channelled through corrupt or oppressive governments. But children in these countries need support. The UK's Department for International Development recently pledged to increase to 50% the proportion of their bilateral aid to education which goes to these countries. One way to deliver this aid is through grassroots community initiatives and civil society organisations.

Two examples are below – one about the situation in Northern Uganda where a decades-long conflict has led to thousands of people living in semi-permanent refugee camps, but girls are now coming together to demand their right to education, and the second from the Girl Child Network, which works in Zimbabwe to enable girls who have faced abuse to stay in school.

Acholi region, northern Uganda

Christine Lawil remembers vividly the day that the Lord's Resistance Army came to her village near Pawel, Uganda. "My husband was working in our garden and the rebels attacked the village," she says. "They beat him and then killed him." The lives of Christine and her three daughters were in tatters. They travelled the 30 km to Pabbo, a desolate and sprawling camp for internal refugees. They have stayed here for the last five years.

The decades-long conflict in northern Uganda is considered one of the worst humanitarian disasters in the world. Humanitarian agencies talk of silent emergencies. This human catastrophe has registered barely a whisper. But the numbers alone speak volumes. There are 1.6 million displaced people living in over 200 camps across northern Uganda.

Children and women comprise 80 per cent of the displaced. All the hallmarks of a stable society have disappeared here. Sanitation is abysmal, and health facilities minimal. The areas surrounding Pabbo are empty and farms lie fallow, so food needs to be brought in by aid agencies.



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But perhaps the biggest impact is on the girls. Ms. Lawil's oldest daughter, Katherine, lives in fear of Pabbo Camp. "There are many problems in the camp," says the 15-year-old. "There are problems of the boys harassing girls and raping them." In her crisp pink-and-blue uniform, Katherine walks past the idle men in the alleyways of Pabbo that double as streams of sewage. Anecdotal testimonies suggest that rape is endemic here.

But despite the odds, the girls are learning. At Olinga School 6, several displaced schools were collapsed into one host facility. The classrooms are overcrowded, but the chatter is cheerful. "I like mathematics," says Katherine, "I want to stay in school so that I can know how to manage my future."

The collapse of the social structure has put pressure on families. Girls become wives as young as age 12, leaving school in the process. They also often drop out when they reach puberty. Many schools here don't have separate sanitation facilities for girls and they are embarrassed to continue. At Olinga, however, the classroom noise is punctuated by the small construction site where a team is building latrines for the girls.

Ms. Lawil will probably not be able to afford to send Katherine to secondary school, as the costs are prohibitive. Since a historic truce was signed between the LRA and the Ugandan Government in August, there are signs of improvement in the Acholi Region. There have been virtually no reports of abductions, and a trickle of people are starting to return home.

Ms. Lawil and her family are desperate to leave and if the brittle peace holds, perhaps they can. "There is no good life in the camp, especially for the children," she says. "I pray to go back home."

In Uganda the African Girls' Education Initiative runs the 'Girls' Education Movement', which is a child-centred, girl-led, grassroots movement to empower girls to take action on issues central to furthering girls' education. In each school, the GEM Club is led by girls, with boys as strategic allies and adult women and men advisors who provide the wisdom of age. The local GEM Clubs are started by students who have attended a GEM facilitator training either in Kampala or in their local district. Over 100 young people have been trained at GEM trainings and GEM Clubs are being started in schools throughout the districts.

The key activities of the GEM Clubs include: conducting school and community mapping exercises that identify out-of-school youth in the community; identifying barriers to school attendance for girls and develop strategies to overcome these barriers; engaging in community awareness efforts designed to sensitize parents and community leaders about the value of girls' education and the issues girls face; developing partnerships with boys and school leaders to more effectively address the issues identified; designing and conducting peer education efforts aimed at issues of safety, security, and life-skills training on health and sexuality issues. One important aspect of GEM was its efforts to develop a gender sensitivity and perspective in boys.

This example is from UNICEF, see http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/uganda_37819.html and http://www.unesc.go.ug/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=357&Itemid=83

Linda Bikinese, Alumna of the Girl Child Network, Zimbabwe

"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 Betty 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 amounts 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 believe 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.

From The Girl Child Network, see http://girlchildnetworkworldwide.org/articles/article_2010-02-01_AlumLindaBikinesi.html