

WFWP Women's Peace Meeting

Mrs Betty Makoni, Founder - Girl Child Network

Birmingham, United Kingdom, 31. July 2014



On July 31st this year, we had the privilege of hearing one of the most powerful woman speakers you could possibly wish to meet, and someone who has triumphed over extreme adversity in her life. Mrs Betty Makoni, originally from Zimbabwe and from the Makoni 'royal family', has had to endure personal physical and sexual abuse, discrimination, persecution, defamation, imprisonment.... the list goes on. Her story is detailed in her autobiography 'Never Again', published in 2012.

She spoke to well over 100 of us, women of all faiths, races and cultures, representing 40 different nationalities, who had gathered to hear her story! "I want you to know me better, and to know my work" she said. "We need to identify and make more peacemakers. Women are critical in the 21st century, especially to disarm men. To tell them we are in a civilised world, with no more fighting. They should talk with words, not missiles. We want peace."

Born in 1971, she witnessed her mother crying every single day, and came to hate the system of patriarchy so dominant in her culture. There were several sets of twins born to her grandmother, all of whom were killed because of the belief that they brought 'bad

luck' to the village. When her mother also gave birth to twins, elders from the village would come round almost daily, saying "Kill your girls, for you to have peace in the village".

After the death of her first husband, her widowed mother left the village in very difficult economic circumstances. It was taboo to remarry. However, she did marry again but suffered extreme domestic violence, on an almost daily basis. Betty continued to ask herself "How can it be that an adult woman cries every day?" On the 28th of January, 1981, aged just 9 years old, she saw her step-father beat her mother to death in front of her. Bleeding from nose and mouth, her mother waved her hand weakly before dying, whispering the words "Goodbye. Look after the children."

Betty had to stop being a child, and she became a mother to her 6 siblings, taking them into her own hands. In spite of problems between her father's and mother's families, and dire economic circumstances, Betty tried to continue her education. An amazing opportunity came up for her to enter a very good Catholic school, St Dominic's, if her entrance paper was accepted. She was about to miss the one bus

which would take her to the school with her paper, but the women already on the bus demanded that the driver stop to let her on, throwing tomatoes and mangoes at him until he stopped and opened the door. If those women had not helped her to catch the bus, her life may well have taken a totally different direction. "I was saved by poor and ordinary women like you" she told us. She became a top student at the school.

Working during the holidays, cleaning hotels and other places, she managed to keep the family alive, but with little money left to pay her school fees. As a result, she was asked to leave a number of times but somehow managed to get 10 GCSE's, all A's and B's, obtain her A levels, and then go on to study English, Shona and Linguistics at University, eventually becoming a teacher. She continued her education with a postgraduate qualification in Theatre and Film Production.



While having achieved so much through her education, Betty always felt herself to be 'a poor girl' on the inside. She never disengaged with her roots, and never forgot that there were so many other 'poor girls' still in extremely difficult circumstances. Having been abused herself as a child, she determined to help other girls like her, and campaigned for many of them, walking through villages and poor areas, going door to door to find girls in need, especially girls who had been abused. Although a qualified teacher, she would say to the girls "I want to teach you life". Beginning with 10 girls, then 50, then 100, 200, she began to build the Girl Child Network and establish villages of hope. As many as 70,000 girls have been helped in Zimbabwe alone, and through cooperation with organisations in other countries perhaps 350,000 girls have benefited from life classes, recovering their dignity and self-respect, finding hope and a new future. Some have found their way to Britain and America, graduating in Social Work and the caring professions. Others have remained in Uganda and Zimbabwe, qualifying as doctors and lawyers. All have been encouraged to go

beyond the 'victim' mindset, and to believe that they were not born a victim, rather they were born 'victorious' and should strive to excel in whatever they do, whatever path they choose to follow. Life is serious and not a game, and whenever an opportunity presents itself then seize it gratefully. There was such a sincere, supportive heart of love and encouragement towards Betty from all the women in the room, and this gave her the freedom to express herself, often in the most intimate of ways and with the kind of things she revealed about her life. She commented that she had never been in the company of such an amazing group of women before, and this bears testimony to the intimacy and friendship we have managed to build up together over the course of the last 21 years.



After her talk, Betty answered a number of questions, covering topics such as Domestic Violence, Female Genital Mutilation and Child Brides, followed by numerous comments from the floor with many of us wanting to contribute to the discussion. We could feel that Betty was genuinely moved, and uplifted, by the positive feelings expressed in all the different contributions. We also requested donations to support Betty's work, and money was raised through the sale of her autobiography, and through the fundraising of one Muslim sister, Sabira, who had been selling goods during Ramadan. Altogether, we raised just over £400 for the Girl Child Network (GCN).



Sabira Karmali had raised money during Ramadan to support GCN.

As always, we finished with a candle-lit prayer and quiet time when a number of us offered a poem, reading or spontaneous prayer from our varied faith traditions, often with tears and emotion.

"I am a poor girl who has learned to pick up the pieces so many times" Betty concluded. "I have lived

a life of fixing things and mobilising people. Let's join hands, because the power to fight poverty lies in our hands. We have to pursue opportunity. Opportunity doesn't chase you. My story is a journey - called 'Never Again'. I have reached my destination, and I want to help others to do the same."»

