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Women Forging New Bonds to Break Old Chains

By Nora Boustany
Washington Post Foreign Service
Tuesday, June 17, 2008; A13

At the age of 6, Betty Makoni could already count change. She roamed the alleys after dark, a basket on her head, selling tomatoes and candles near Zimbabwe's capital.

One night, a neighbor lured her and three other girls, ages 10, 12 and 14, into his shop and raped them.

"He believed if you extract the blood of virgins and smear it over the walls of your business, your fortunes would multiply. It was 1977," before the end of white rule, she said, "and we had no access to the police."

Today, Makoni is a prominent activist, part of an emerging network of female leaders who started programs in their own communities, branched out to the national level and later forged bonds with global organizations to provide protection through education, legal counseling and grants.

Their efforts have helped women and girls around the world counter the effects of sexual violence and other injustices through such mechanisms as counseling, the media and dance in societies dominated by men and shaped by cultural and religious sensitivities sometimes at odds with women's rights.

Makoni was in Washington last month to lobby U.S. legislators for passage of the International Violence Against Women Act, which aims to integrate U.S. efforts to end gender-based violence into U.S. foreign assistance programs. The bill, introduced last year by Sens. [Joseph R. Biden Jr.](#) (D-Del.) and [Richard G. Lugar \(R-Ind.\)](#), would extend into the international arena a 1994 act to combat violence against women in the United States.

The legislation, introduced in the House this spring, seeks to link foreign assistance and diplomacy in about 20 countries, said Paula J. Dobriansky, undersecretary of state for democracy and global affairs. The bill's other goals include reducing the rate of HIV/AIDS, boosting prosperity in impoverished countries and alleviating conditions that invite terrorism.

"It is essential that American legislators look at and be forced to deal with this issue pragmatically as a leading public health problem in the world," said Kavita Ramdas, head of the Global Fund for Women, a foundation that provides grants to groups advocating in behalf of women's rights.

Ramdas said the organization has received more than 3,500 appeals for help. Some are handwritten, others are typed in Arabic, Hindi, Swahili and other languages. "We got a letter from Yahalon, [Mexico](#), that was dictated to the village priest and signed with thumbprints," she said.

And one was from Makoni.

After attending college, Makoni returned to Chitungwiza, her home town, to teach at a high school. One day,

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a 13-year-old girl told her she had been raped by her mother's boyfriend. Soon, other girls came forward, and Makoni started a club to counsel the group of 10. The next week, 50 girls showed up.

There are now 35,000 Zimbabwean girls in such clubs, part of the Girl Child Network. As a result, Makoni said, boys behave more cautiously, refraining from taunting girls at their first signs of puberty for fear of disciplinary action at school. Her efforts have also helped jail men for abuses and exposed crimes of senior officials.

"Polar bears, elephants and ivory have more preservation rights. The world must reprioritize for women," Makoni said. "If we do not get these girls at a young age, we lose them. Creating a preventative culture is key."

Dealing With the Displaced

In 1990, Shreen Abdul Saroor and her family were displaced from the Mannar region of northern Sri Lanka by a militant group fighting for a separate Tamil state. She started working with some of the 75,000 other Muslims evicted to the eastern region of Puttalam, and was struck by their conservative Islamist transformation.

Secular women who once donned saris were wearing head-to-toe burqas, gloves and black veils that prevented them from making it down a street without an escort. Young women were being bullied into covering up.

"Our community was seeking its identity through religion. In Puttalam, the place of birth written into identity cards is Camp A or B. I feared this radicalism would make them take arms," Saroor said.

She started a volunteer group to tend to the displaced. Her Mannar Women's Development Federation brought together 15 Muslim and Tamil women, and started off with a \$30 micro loan to a woman who wanted to start a pancake stall. Their activities spread to 36 villages, launching small industries for roasting cashews and canning fish paste.

Supervisors monitoring their progress began seeing bruises on the women and hearing about brawls. Mullahs and Catholic priests were brought in to counsel the men. For the women, the federation provided guidance and legal coaching, and sought court orders when needed.

"We don't deal with the men directly," Saroor said.

The most brutal beatings occurred at night when men returned from work, so Saroor and her colleagues held silent vigils outside the homes of vulnerable women. "The issue stopped being private and became public," she said.

Challenging 'Honor Killings'

So-called honor killings make victims of as many as 5,000 women and girls each year, mostly in the Middle East and Asia, according to the [U.N. Population Fund](#). In Turkey, media attention fueled public outrage over the practice and led to a change in the law that allowed all charges against a rapist to be dropped if he married his victim.

In 2004, Guldunya Toren, 22, from a village in southeastern Turkey, was shot by her brothers for refusing to marry the rapist who had impregnated her. She survived, but the brothers tracked her down in the hospital and shot her dead.

The tragedy both angered and inspired Vuslat Dogan Sabanci, chief executive of the Hurriyet publishing group. She urged editors to expose honor killings as crimes and to cast shame on the tradition. Hurriyet launched a crusade for change in its coverage and organized bus trips for doctors and lawyers to raise awareness. A new editorial policy included instructions not to refer to women as helpless victims.

The rest of the media followed, as did celebrities. With funding from European and private sources, a 24-hour hotline was set up. Turkey's government launched its own hotline to assist women in distress.

But to keep their sons from serving jail time for honor killings, families began urging daughters accused of dishonor to kill themselves with poison or other means.

"There is this silent genocide going on against these women," Ramdas said.

'Your Bodies Are Not Impure'

Some female activists are moving beyond the rescue and protection stage to healing. Sohini Chakraborty, a sociology major and trained dancer from Calcutta University, remembers strolling through a book fair in 1996 and seeing a poem pinned to a board outside one stall.

They sell me, my own blood, for some gold and some silver.

I rinse and rinse my mouth, but the treachery remains.

I am no more a bride to be, I am no more a mother to be,

I am no more a future to be.

Chakraborty's curiosity led her to a shelter for trafficked women, many of whom had been sold by their families.

Trafficking is deeply rooted in economic inequality, Ramdas said. In [India](#) alone, the wives and daughters of an estimated 10,000 farmers who committed suicide last year because of meager crops migrated to cities, many becoming sex workers. Abused women often are unable to bear or raise healthy babies.

It occurred to Chakraborty that she could help them, through dance.

When she went to a West Bengal village, women there thought she would teach them Bollywood dance routines. "Your bodies are not impure, they are yours," she instructed them, as they reenacted traumas through dance to reconnect with their bodies.

Chakraborty won a three-year stipend from Ashoka, a global association for innovators in social change founded in 1980. Now, her trainees perform to Indian music and such favorites as [Bob Dylan](#)'s "Blowin' in the Wind" and [John Lennon](#)'s "Imagine" to raise funds for expanded programs.

"It makes my day when I see them not needing society's sympathy to feel good . . . fighting for an equal chance," Chakraborty said.

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