

IF I DIDN'T LEAVE ZIMBABWE BY THE WEEKEND, I WOULD BE RAPED OR KILLED

Filmmaker Michealene Cristini Risley tells MC how she risked her life in Zimbabwe to produce her documentary. TEXT RENVILIM

“I was sharing a cell with eight other women in Harare—also known as the torture centre of Zimbabwe. It was cold, wet, and the main area of the jail was covered in faeces. It wasn't a good idea to move around the prison too much—anybody could hurt you. When we were being fingerprinted on the lowest floor, I could see these little rooms containing torture equipment—a stool in the middle and electrical wiring. Another portion of the floor was sulphuric acid—if they wanted you to disappear, they just pushed you in.

“When it was my turn to be questioned, my interrogator would scream at me, convinced I was a CIA agent. ‘That’s ridiculous,’ I laughed unwisely, ‘I don’t work for the US government. I don’t even like President Bush.’ He got very angry and told me that Bush and Mugabe (Zimbabwe’s president) were ‘cut from the same cloth’ and that I shouldn’t make fun of them. In his office, there was an AK-47 rifle hanging from the wall, and three hand grenades lined up on his desk—I would later learn that he was well known for his killings.

“It wasn’t until my second day in prison that the fear crept in. My assistant Lauren, who had been imprisoned with me, went into shock and there was no medical help available for her. At my lowest point, I remember sitting on the floor, thinking ‘My God, what have I done? What if I leave my three children without a mother? How could I be so selfish?’ I had put my passion before my kids.”

Speaking from her home in San Francisco, Michealene Cristini Risley’s voice—despite the poor reception that accompanies a long-distance call—is quiet and calm, but unmistakably steely as she tells me about the squalid conditions in which she was imprisoned for three days without food or water. Of course, such strength should be expected from someone who, in 2007, travelled to Zimbabwe amidst a severe food shortage, frequent cholera outbreaks and significant political tension, bringing with her only a camera and her assistant.

“I thought Zimbabwe would change my life, but I never guessed that I would be in so much danger,” Michealene recalls. The subject of her documentary, *Tapestries of Hope* (released September 28, 2010), focuses on The Girl Child Network (GCN), an organisation that helps girls who have been raped or abused. To live in Zimbabwe is dangerous enough, but girls and young women are especially at risk. In a country where over 15 percent of adults are estimated to be living with HIV/AIDs, and where foreign aid sanctions leave little help available to assist Zimbabwe’s crippled medical system, people are pushed to extremes out of desperation.

The belief that a man who rapes a virgin will be cured of HIV/AIDs – a myth propagated by Zimbabwean traditional healers – has led to the rape and sexual assault of young girls (and in one GCN case, a one-day old baby), as their blood is considered to be purer the younger they are and imbued with potent healing powers. The physiology of the female genitals means that girls are five times more likely to contract HIV, and rape



LEFT: Young girls at the Girl Child Network empowerment village share their stories with Michealene.

BELOW: Concelia, resting her weary eyes. She was rescued by Betty Makoni after being raped, and now acts as Betty’s driver.

victims often end up suffering the same grim fate as their attackers, in what can only be described as a vicious circle. The concept of consent is also a non-issue in Zimbabwe, as one woman explains in the documentary: “Here, a good woman never says yes to sex. So ‘no’ means ‘yes’.”

When a girl is raped, Michealene explains, they are “ostracised by the very society that advises raping virgins can cure HIV/AIDs” and often have no-one to turn to for treatment and protection. Enter Betty Makoni, the phenomenal woman behind GCN. Betty and Michealene first met in San Francisco in the spring of 2007, when Betty was in the USA to speak about her work.

Michealene, who herself experienced child sexual abuse, was moved and inspired by Betty’s tale, sparking her desire to film a documentary in Zimbabwe. Betty was raped at the age of 6 and watched her mother being murdered by her father, two events that sealed her determination to speak out against such abuse: “When I think of my mother, I think: I must fight for women.”

Tapestries of Hope follows GCN’s work at the empowerment villages, where girls who have been raped can seek medical help, psychological support, legal advice and education. “I wanted to make a place where a girl can just knock on the door, it will open, and she will have someone to talk to,” says Betty. The buildings are painted blue (a colour traditionally reserved for boys in Zimbabwe) to help the girls gain a sense of power and limitlessness in order to confront the actions of their abusers – what Betty terms “The journey



to breaking silences.” So far, an estimated 300,000 girls have received assistance through the four empowerment villages and 700 ‘girls clubs’, which connect with Zimbabwean women on a local grassroots level.

Getting the girls into school is of the utmost importance to Betty, as many of the girls who approach her are too poor to afford to buy



TOP: Despite enduring traumatic events and sexual abuse at such young ages, the GCN girls are determined to stand strong and proud. **BELOW:** Little Runyararo was found injured and abandoned at a bus terminal.

their own underwear, let alone fund their education. USD \$50 keeps a girl in the rural areas in school for one year, but it is no small sum in a country where 80 percent of the population live below the poverty line. “Education is freedom,” Betty tells the girls at GCN, “Education will make you be counted amongst other women. It gives you the

power to think, the power to choose, the power to have a voice, the power even to challenge unfair traditional practices.”

Michealene had the chance to record the girls’ stories and to watch GCN in action, such as holding discussions with traditional healers and taking girls to seek treatment for HIV/AIDs or other sexually transmitted diseases they have contracted as a result of being raped. The documentary does not shy away from the horrendous acts of violence and abuse that the girls have suffered: there is little Maggie, who can barely walk due to a severe

case of genital warts after being gang raped by her mother’s boyfriend and his friends. Three year old Runyararo was also found injured and abandoned at a bus terminal after someone attempted to rape her.

But the tenacity of many girls and their refusal to settle for the role of ‘victim’ comes across loud and clear on camera. One young girl who was raped by her uncle when she was fourteen calmly advises, “I would say to other girls who have been raped—it is not the end of your life. Try to be someone in life, and you can move on.” Her ambition, she says, is to be a flight attendant.

Michealene’s presence at the empowerment village did not go unnoticed. After a week of filming, Michealene and her assistant were arrested by the Harare police and the Zimbabwean Central Intelligence Organisation. “Fifteen very large African men surrounded our car, accusing me of working for the American CIA. After searching through our belongings at Betty’s house, we were loaded into a pickup truck and taken to jail in Harare.”

Michealene was told by the US Embassy in Zimbabwe that she needed to get out by the

weekend or else she would be raped or killed, but received no help from them. “I was only released because news of my arrest was posted on the Tapestries of Hope Facebook page, which was spotted by a journalist. He had a contact in the CIA who he notified about my situation, and after some negotiation, his contact called him back and said, ‘She’s coming out, and she has her film.’”

She and her assistant had to pay for their own deportations to South Africa, but her precious film was clutched close to her body as Michealene boarded the plane, eventually reaching the safety of her home in California. Betty Makoni, however, was later arrested and made to stand in the same Harare prison for three days as ‘punishment for bringing a CIA agent into the country’.

After serious threats towards her and her family’s safety, Betty had to flee Zimbabwe and go into hiding. This has not dimmed her courage—as Michealene has said, “Betty won’t stand by silently while girls are harmed.” She still plays a key role in running GCN, and received the CNN Hero Award for ‘Protecting the Powerless’ in 2009. Other African countries including Botswana and South Africa are also expressing interest in setting up local girls clubs in conjunction with GCN.

Since the release of *Tapestries*, which has scooped up a generous handful of awards, Michealene has been invited to speak at the United Nations on the importance of preventing violence against women, and to promote the International Violence Against Women Act (IVAWA), which supports global action against gender-based violence and abuse.

“Hollywood has refused to touch the documentary because it’s not commercial. Many times when I’ve presented statistics about Zimbabwe’s situation, I’ve been called a liar by board members and executives in complete denial,” she says. “I stay positive because many other people’s reactions to *Tapestries* have been incredibly supportive. A tremendous number of people around the world do care—there has been interest as far away as Nepal. But we need a global effort involved in preventing violence against women. Unless that happens, we won’t change anything.”

I ask Michealene, whose next project will examine sexual trafficking in the USA, whether she still has hope for Zimbabwe. She is unwavering in her answer: “I remember being at the GCN empowerment village and blowing soap bubbles into the air, to the delight of the girls. Their

laughter brushed across my heart, and it brought other waves of grief and joy to see such resilience. So I would never give up hope, because the people there are so incredible.”

For more information about *Tapestries of Hope* and the Girl Child Network, visit tapestriesofhope.com and girlchildnetworkworldwide.org.



LEFT: Michealene with the phenomenal Betty Makoni. **BELOW:** Weaving her documentary, you can see GCN’s blue huts behind Michealene. Blue, a colour traditionally reserved for boys in Zimbabwe, gives the girls a sense of power and limitlessness.

