INVESTING IN TEENAGE GIRLS

Stories of Girls Overcoming Challenges in Zimbabwe
The Sista2Sista documentation has been developed through the cooperative efforts of the Ministry of Health and Child Care (MOHCC), Government of Zimbabwe and implementing partners ZAPSO and FACT. Special thanks go to the donors of the Sista2Sista Club programme under UNFPA’s Integrated Support Programme generously supported by the Governments of Britain, Ireland and Sweden. The Sista2Sista programme is implemented in the selected 26 districts across Zimbabwe by implementing partners FACT (Family AIDS Caring Trust), Matabeleland AIDS Council (MAC), Midlands AIDS Support Organisation (MASO), Regai Dzive Shiri (RDS), World Vision Zimbabwe (WVZ), Zimbabwe AIDS Prevention And Support Organisation (ZAPSO), Zimbabwe Community Health Research (ZiChiRe).

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Foreword

In his message for the 2016 World Population Day celebrations, our Executive Director, Babatunde Osotimehin said when a teenage girl has the power, the means and the information to make her own decisions in life, she is more likely to overcome obstacles that stand between her and a healthy, productive future. This will benefit her, her family and her community.

The teenage years, are for many girls in Zimbabwe, a time of increasing vulnerability, exclusion and sometimes just plain discrimination, with many girls dropping out of school due to various reasons. Some of these are discriminatory in nature. In some communities in Zimbabwe, a girl who reaches puberty is deemed by her family or community as ready for marriage, pregnancy and childbirth. She may be forced to leave school and be married off. Because of her age, she may suffer a debilitating condition, such as fistula, from delivering a child before her body is ready.

In Zimbabwe, there is a 31% prevalence rate of child marriage with nearly 1 in 10 teenage girls giving birth every year. More than 1 in 3 women (15-49) have experienced physical violence since the age of 15 years (34.8%).

It is with these challenges in mind that UNFPA and its partners started the Sista2Sista girls’ empowerment programme in 2013, thanks to the support from the Governments of Sweden, Ireland and Britain. Under the committed guidance from their mentors, the young girls were able to identify solutions to their challenges at the same time being capacitated with essential life skills.

Zimbabwe, like any other country, needs to sustain its investment in the health and education of its youth, especially teenage girls, and create opportunities for them to realize their full potential. Investments are needed to protect their health, including their sexual and reproductive health, to enable them to receive quality education and to expand economic opportunities, including those for decent work. Without concerted efforts by all stakeholders to invest in young girls, the girls’ future will remain bleak. Thus, all stakeholders have an important role to play in shaping policies and programmes that affect teenage girls’ lives. This way, the country is better positioned to reap the demographic dividend, which can propel economic growth to combat poverty.

As UNFPA Zimbabwe, we work with the Government of Zimbabwe, United Nations agencies and other development partners to invest in teenage girls through programmes in HIV and gender-based violence prevention, family planning and adolescent sexual and reproductive health (ASRH). This booklet contains human interest stories from our flagship Sista2Sista Club girls’ empowerment programme which is making a real and lasting impact on the lives of teenage girls across Zimbabwe.

Cheikh Tidiane Cisse

UNFPA Zimbabwe
Country Representative
Launched in September 2013, the Sista2Sista girls’ only clubs create safe spaces for mentoring vulnerable adolescent girls, a space where they can speak with mentors and each other about their problems and receive information, counselling and support.

Female mentors manage the clubs targeting girls vulnerable to negative sexual and reproductive health outcomes. The mentor actively seeks for vulnerable girls in the community using a door to door approach. A risk assessment tool helps to determine girls at high risk in five areas namely self-awareness, education, social relationships, sexual knowledge and financial awareness.

The girls go through a 40 session program covering these themes such as sexual and reproductive health and rights, financial literacy, and how to navigate difficult social situations, including coercive relationships, with the goal of increasing their personal agency to make good reproductive health choices and act on them. The programme also aims to give girls the confidence and self-esteem to stand up for themselves.

The programme is implemented in 26 districts with five mentors per district. Each mentor recruits two groups of 25 vulnerable girls over the course of a year, typically with one group of younger girls in-school and older girls out-of-school. Outcomes tracked by the programme are pregnancy incidence, school drop-out and re-entry, contraceptive uptake and sexual abuse.

Between September 2013 and December 2015, 12,941 girls were recruited into the Sista2Sista clubs under UNFPA’s Integrated Support Programme, supported by the Governments of Britain, Ireland and Sweden. The Sista2Sista Club programme will continue from 2016 under the newly established Health Development Fund.
“Girls should get empowered, girls should practice good sexual and reproductive health and rights, girls should have their own assets. Getting married is not the final destination for women, as a woman you should have your own things and have your own happy life.”

Felisitas Gondo has been a Sista2Sista club mentor since the programme began in her community of Rufaro Farm in the rural Hurungwe district of Mashonaland West, Zimbabwe. Teenage pregnancy and early marriage due to cultural practices are the biggest challenges faced by girls in her community but she is tackling these issues through mentoring, counselling and working closely with community and traditional leaders.

She is also working with a number of Sista2Sista club graduates who have become community mobilisers, helping her to organise group visits to the local clinic for HIV and cervical cancer screenings. Currently she is mentoring 75 girls in the Takuna, Takudzwa and Rufaro Sista2Sista Clubs.

“What motivated me to become a mentor was to empower girls to get an education to have a good foundation in life, safeguarding them from early marriages. I know what it is like to be in the situations they find themselves…I was raped at 16 years old, dropped out of school in form 2 and forced to marry my abuser, as was the culture then. What I have experienced has compelled me to change it for other girls.”

Makaita Maoyise became a Sista2Sista mentor in her community of Richmond, in the rural Makonde district in north-eastern Zimbabwe in 2013. She has mentored eight groups of Sista2Sista clubs, amounting to over 200 girls. The biggest issue faced by girls in her community results from poverty; a lack of money for school fees leading to school drops outs and early marriages, which are also fuelled by religious beliefs, cultural practices and the farm compound lifestyle. Makaita works closely with traditional and religious leaders in the community, and is invited to all important meetings to represent the girl child. She is currently mentoring 50 girls through two Sista2Sista clubs.
“It is so important to invest in the girl child because the challenge in our communities is that more value is put on boys, and they are afforded more opportunities. We must empower our girls and encourage them to be self-aware, self-confident, practice their sexual and reproductive health and rights in order to give them equal opportunities in life.”

Betty Wadiya is a child care worker and a Sista2Sista mentor in her community within the rural district of Makonde in Mashonaland West. She began working as a mentor in 2013 and has since mentored over 175 girls.

The biggest challenge faced in her community is the problem of child sexual abuse, particularly young girls engaged in sex work. Betty is working with local authorities including the Zimbabwe Republic Police Victim Friendly Unit to report and prosecute cases of abuse and sensitise the community. Currently she is mentoring 50 girls in two Sista2Sista clubs, both in and out-of-school.

“Girls must be encouraged to speak out and not look down on themselves. Through the clubs we can talk freely about issues like relationships, how our body changes, refusing to marry young, not dropping out of school and different ways to look after our money. The girls can be with members of their own age and learn life skills through games and sports.”

Memory Makanjera has been a Sista2Sista mentor in her community of Mahuwe in the remote district of Mbire in Mashonaland Central Province since the programme began in 2013. She has mentored close to 200 girls in her community where the greatest challenge faced is that of early marriages and school drop outs due to extreme poverty.

Memory works with local community leaders and her programme officers to come up with innovative and fun ways to encourage girls to join the Sista2Sista clubs, such as forming the local netball team.
Fifteen-year-old Shamiso Nyamutamba has endured more than her share of tragedy. When she was three, her mother died. Two years later, her father also passed away. She went to live with an abusive uncle, and was nearly forced to marry an older man. She has only recently found peace – and the promise of a better future – with the help of a unique programme designed to empower adolescent girls, in Mahuwe in the rural Mbire District located in north-eastern Zimbabwe.

Too many girls like Shami face entrenched discrimination and violence, abuses often abetted by deep poverty in rural Zimbabwe. But with knowledge of her human rights, and the support of other girls and women through the Sista2Sista Club implemented by partners supported by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) Zimbabwe.

“Sista2Sista taught me that early marriage is wrong...and to report cases of abuse straight away.”

An uphill battle

When Shami’s parents died, both from HIV-related causes, her grandparents could not afford to care for her. An uncle from Harare, Zimbabwe’s capital, offered to bring her to the city and enrol her in school.

But when she arrived, he sent her to work instead. She performed menial jobs, even physical labour, and her uncle was often violent.

As she grew older, the abuse worsened. She recalls that one day, he told her, “I intend to go to bed with you.”

Shami reported him to an aunt, who took her away from Harare. This time, Shami went to live with her sister on a farm.
But her sister could not afford to send her to school. An attempt to obtain an education grant for orphans was unsuccessful. Finally, her sister sent her back to their home village in Mbire District to live with their grandparents. They also could not afford to send Shami to school full time and the days she did attend she would walk over 20km and often go hungry. She did menial jobs in exchange for food. Her grandparents hoped marriage might change her situation.

In the traditional Shona practice of ‘kuzvarira’, poor girls are married off to men in more affluent families, often in exchange for food and other materials or for a bride price, called “lobola”. Following this tradition, a marriage was hastily arranged between Shami and an older neighbour.

A turning point

Around the same time, Shami learned about the Sista2Sista club, a girls’ empowerment programme run by ZAPSO, supported by UNFPA. Girls in the village encouraged Shami to attend a session at the Kodzero Sista2Sista club. (‘Kodzero’ is a Shona word meaning ‘our rights.’)

“At first Shamiso was very quiet and isolated. She kept to herself a lot and took a long time to open up to me and the group,” said Memory Makanjera, the club’s mentor and facilitator.

“I told her it is okay to tell me any problems you are facing. Feel free to talk to me anytime.”

After a few sessions, Shami told Memory about the impending marriage. Memory alerted Mrs. Mereni Chakanetsa, the ZAPSO Programme Officer in Mbire who immediately reported to the police. The marriage plans were quickly cancelled, the man was reprimanded and warned to stay away from Shami and other young girls.

A bright future

Shami is also now the chairperson of the Kodzero Sista2Sista Club, where she encourages other girls to join so they can learn the same lessons she did.
“Sista2Sista taught me that early marriage is wrong and to report cases of abuse straight away,” said Shami.

She has also joined the Young People’s Network on SRH/HIV/AIDS, founded by the National AIDS Council (NAC), attending national meetings in Harare where she works with other passionate young people promoting SRHR in Zimbabwe. The club also encourages girls to get an education. With the intervention of the Sista2Sista programme and the assistance and generosity of ZAPSO and Ms. Chakanetsa who invited Shami to stay with her in her family home close to school.

“I met Shamiso during one of our monitoring and evaluation visits [as ZAPSO]. When I met the girl I was really touched. I felt it was important for her to go to school and not sit at home all day so I invited her to stay with me and my husband.”

Shami was able to attend school full time and has proven to be academically gifted, even winning awards. Just as things were looking up for Shami, she began to fall extremely ill. She was coughing and started developing sores. Ms. Chakenetsa decided to bring Shami for a HIV test. She tested positive.

“It turns out I was born with HIV but I did not know all this time,” said Shami. “What I am so grateful for is that when the family and the Sista2Sista club found out my status, they accepted me and loved me like a family. I am now on my medication and I am healthy. I can now look forward to my future.”

The Sista2Sista Club programme has so far had an enormous impact across the country: From July 2014 to June 2015, 9,219 girls were recruited into the Sista2Sista clubs. And many of these girls have committed to improve not only their own circumstances but those of other girls as well. Shami, for example, dreams of becoming a police officer.

“I want to join the police so I can protect other young girls from being abused,” she says.
Sibongile’s Story

Sibongile lives with her family in Richmond, where the community largely depends on agriculture for their livelihood. Sibongile’s family survives on subsistence farming.

In 2011 her mother fell seriously ill with chronic ulcer problems and her father also began struggling with asthma preventing them from working on the land to fend for the family. This dashed Sibongile’s chances of continuing her education, she was regularly turned away from school for non-payment of fees.

“I was very upset because in my early primary schooling I was always first and second in the class now I was coming last, sometimes 20th place because I was not learning enough”

In 2014, at the age of 12, Sibongile joined the Sista2Sista Club. She became part of a group of 16 other vulnerable girls mentored by Makaita Maoyise. The group went through various themes on gender, health, education and financial awareness, which was of particular interest to Sibongile given her family’s financial situation.

“When we went through the ‘Wants & Needs’ budgeting session in the club I realised there was something I could do something myself about my situation.”

Sibongile talked to her mentor about starting an income generating project to raise money for school fees.

At the age of 11 Sibongile Majaura (14) was at risk of dropping out of school facing a future of early child marriage, teenage pregnancy and a life of poverty. Three years on, Sibongile is exceeding in her school studies and running a thriving chicken rearing business to support her education and her family thanks to the support of a unique programme designed to empower and invest in adolescent girls in Richmond in the rural district of Makonde in north-western Zimbabwe.

Many girls like Sibongile face this fate due to deep poverty and harmful religious and cultural practices in rural Zimbabwe. But with knowledge and self-awareness, and the support of other girls and women through the Sista2Sista Club implemented by partners supported by UNFPA, this young entrepreneur has been able to transform her life and that of her family.
Makaita was impressed by her display of maturity and determination, particularly as she was the youngest in the group.

They discussed different types of projects she could embark on and Sibongile indicated that she preferred the poultry project as her mother used to keep chickens and she had some prior knowledge of it. Her only stumbling block was capital to kick start the project.

“Traditionally there has been high rates of school drop outs among girls in our community due to poverty, child marriage and teenage pregnancy. That is why we encourage the girls through the Sista2Sista programme to begin income generating programmes and help them where we can,” said Sista2Sista mentor Makaita.

Makaita informed her programme officer of Sibongile’s story and they provided her with a packet of corn snacks (jiggies) for resale to get her started. She showed great entrepreneurial prowess as she exchanged the corn snacks with maize which she later sold for $15 and bought two indigenous chickens [a hen and a cock] for $10. The hen laid eggs producing more chickens, which Sibongile then sold for $5 each. This enterprise allowed her to pay for her school fees and buy a uniform and stationery.

Due to her thriving chicken rearing business, Sibongile has never been sent back home for non-payment of school fees and is even covering her younger brother’s (11 years) school fees and purchasing basic commodities for the family.

Sibongile’s parents are absolutely amazed by their daughter’s innovation and high level of maturity. “What our daughter has done is a miracle to us; said Lydia, Sibongile’s mother.

“What our daughter has done is a miracle to us.
Our lives have been transformed through her hard work.”
Mrs Chitana, one of the teachers at Richmond secondary school, put her weight solidly behind the Sista2Sista programme, highlighting that it was contributing immensely towards the empowerment of vulnerable girls in the community.

“We have witnessed a dramatic decrease in the number of school drop outs among teenage girls in the community since the Sista2Sista clubs started operating. For example, in 2012 we had 8 girls sitting their O-levels, this year we have 37. The behaviour change is also noticeable, the girls are now mature and empowered.”

Sibongile’s goal is to pursue further studies up to Advanced Level and continue on to University to one day become a nurse, enabling her to fully look after herself and her family.

She is encouraging other girls in her community to join the Sista2Sista clubs in order to gain valuable knowledge and life skills.

“In the club I learnt about self-awareness, especially as a young girl not to rush into marriage and sexual relationships until I am older. It is common practice traditionally here to marry young but this puts us at risk of HIV & STIs, and as we are still young we don’t have the decision making skills and can suffer abuse within the relationship”

She also urges other girls in the community to continue with their education and for those who dropped out of school to go back to school again.

Sibongile says that her chicken rearing business does not interfere with her studies as her mother helps out with the business while she is at school and it keeps her occupied in the evenings and weekends.

Currently Sibongile has 9 chickens (2 cocks & 7 hens) and 56 chicks and has constructed a bigger fowl run to house her expanding business. “I wish to learn more about chicken vaccinations and grow my business even more.”
Hazel (15) was just 12 years old when her babamkuru (brother-in-law) attempted to sexually assault and marry her. When Hazel resisted and told her family, she felt like an outcast and a trouble maker until the Sista2Sista club taught her that no one has the right to interfere with her body or her future.

Hazel was sent to live with her older sister and her husband after her father had a serious accident in 2013, leaving him hospitalised for two years and unable to take care of her properly.

As she settled into her new home, Hazel was enjoying spending time with her family until her brother-in-law Mati [name changed] soon turned his attention to her. He made sexual advances towards her and demanded she should become his second wife, derived from a traditional practice in Shona called chiramo. When Hazel resisted, he attempted to rape her.

“I learned that my body is precious and I can’t let anybody touch me or do whatever they want to me.”

“He said that you are my wife as well because he married my sister and he tried to have sex with me,” said Hazel. This happened. However, her older sister agreed that she should officially become Mati’s second wife. “During this time I was not yet clear about who I was and what I wanted to do with my life, I never expected this.”

It was around this time that Hazel heard of the local Sista2Sista club in Richmond. She was encouraged to join by a friend and was referred to the mentor Makaite who took Hazel through the risk assessment and recruited her in to the club.

She began to open up to the girls and her mentor about what was happening at home. Hazel said at first she didn’t take this proposal very seriously, thinking it surely would not happen. “I didn’t know how serious they were and I was also clueless as to what it exactly meant at the time.”

But when mentor Makaite heard what was happening she advised Hazel not to accept the proposal and inform her parents what was being planned. Hazel returned to her parents’ house and they stopped the planned marriage. Weeks later, while Hazel was back living with her parent’s she was sent to pick up a hoe from the field when she met her brother-in-law. “He said to me ‘Come here! You thought you were clever telling on me but I have you now,’” recounted Hazel.
When Hazel refused and began to walk away, Mati attempted to rape Hazel again. She ran for her life as he chased after her. Fortunately, she managed to escape.

When Hazel arrived home, she told her parents what had happened after which, she went to fetch mentor Makaite who came over and spoke to Hazel’s parents about the issue. Realising how serious it was, Hazel’s father called his elder daughter and son-in-law to a family discussion, warning him to stay away from Hazel for good or he would report him to the police.

Mati ran away for a few weeks, no one knew where exactly he had gone. After this “everything went bad” according to Hazel. The family was fighting and she felt responsible.

“Everybody didn’t like me anymore, like I was a trouble maker. I wasn’t getting along with my other siblings because I had caused problems in the family.”

Hazel doubted herself and questioned whether she had done the right thing in telling the Sista2Sista mentor and her parents about the attempted sexual abuse. That was until she went through the Sista2Sista club sessions on self-awareness, making her realise she was absolutely right to report the situation and that Mati was wrong to touch her.

“I learned that my body is precious and I can’t let anybody touch me or do whatever they want to me.”

Hazel is now in Form 2 at Richmond secondary school. She hopes to finish her A-levels so she can go to college and get a good job to look after her family.

Mati has returned to the area and still lives with his family but has not attempted to go near Hazel again. Hazel is no longer worried, she said she feels empowered and protected since joining the Sista2Sista Club.
Marvellous Zendera (22) got married at the age of 19. “It was just one of those things you do. You know how boys are, they tell you they can offer you the world and convince you to get married,” says Marvellous shaking her head as she recalls her naivety then.

Marvellous fell pregnant shortly after marrying and within two months her husband married another wife. Polygamous marriages are a common traditional practice in her community of Richmond in Makonde district in north-western Zimbabwe.

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It wasn’t until her husband eventually married three more wives that Marvellous decided she had had enough.

“At that point I asked myself why am I hanging on, I might catch HIV and I might die. What for? Let me just leave.”

Marvellous left her husband, taking herself and her child, now 2 years, back to her father’s house, also in the Richmond area. Life became really tough for Marvellous back at home. Her mother died when she was still young and she had no one at home to help or advise her.

“I had no idea how to care for a child. At that point I seriously thought of taking my own life. I was thinking if I can’t take care of myself, how can I take care of the baby?”

It is around this time of despair that Marvellous met Makaite Maoyise, a mentor of the Richmond Sista2Sista club. Makaite took Marvellous through the risk assessment where she explained her problems.

“The mentor invited me to come along to the clinic where I was tested for STIs. I was tested for HIV and the result came negative. I was also screened for cancer and everything was okay.”

After visiting the clinic, Marvellous joined the Sista2Sista club where she went through sessions on self-awareness,
sexual awareness, financial awareness and social awareness. In particular, Marvellous learned how to take care of herself and her baby and how to plan her future.

“That’s when I realised I could have killed myself for nothing. The club made me see that I actually can take care of myself and my baby and I can have a great life. I feel very empowered now!”

With inspiration from the Sista2Sista Club, Marvellous is now running a successful market gardening business and people buy “truckloads of her tomatoes”. Although her market gardening project is thriving, Marvellous is looking to diversify from vegetables to garment sewing and sees a business potential in making uniforms for school children in her locality.

“I am looking to the future where I see myself being able to have a business that employs other people who can earn an income from me. I am really keen to have a sewing company to make not only school uniforms for children in the area but other clothes too.”

Her ultimate goal is to be able to provide for her family. “Then I can do everything I’ve ever wanted to do and take care of my child, my father and my younger siblings to make sure they go to school.”

“That’s when I realised I could have killed myself for nothing. The club made me see that I actually can take care of myself and my baby and I can have a great life.”
Twenty-one year old Florence Katuruza had a promising academic career, excelling at her ordinary level exams in Richmond Secondary School, in Makonde district of Zimbabwe’s Mashonaland West Province until she was forced to drop out of school when she became pregnant at the age of 17.

An extremely bright girl in Form 4, Florence had passed 6 subjects in her O-level exams and had dreams of progressing to A-level when she unintentionally fell pregnant to her then boyfriend.

Florence, an orphan living with relatives at the time, was sent to stay with her boyfriend who she was forced to marry, as was accepted tradition in Shona culture. When her baby was six months old, Florence met Makaite Maoyise, a local behaviour change facilitator (BCF) who had just been appointed mentor of the Sista2Sista Club, a girls’ empowerment programme run by FACT supported by UNFPA.

“She approached me to join other girls in the Sista2Sista club. She was concerned that I was too young and not ready for a large family. Her advice was I needed to plan my life properly,” Florence recalls.

Makaite assessed Florence’s situation and encouraged her to join the Sista2Sista club. The girls went through a number of sessions and Florence learnt the importance of family planning and protecting her sexual and reproductive health and rights.

“Through the Sista2Sista club I was empowered to go to the clinic for family planning services, HIV testing and advised to use condoms. Before the club I was clueless about these things I didn’t know I could receive such services at the hospital for free,” said Florence.

When Florence returned home to her husband and told him that they must start using condoms to protect
themselves, he was not happy. “He became very angry and started shouting at me.” She told her Sista2Sista Mentor, Makaite who convened them both for couples counselling.

“I explained to Florence and her husband that they are both very young. They have their whole lives ahead of them and they must protect themselves against diseases. He understood and agreed to start using condoms,” recounted Makaite.

Among the other Sista2Sista Club sessions she completed was the module on financial awareness, which started Florence thinking about what she could do for herself.

“That’s when it dawned on me that I had no idea what I was doing with my life or what I wanted to do. Since I had been empowered with knowledge on my health, access to health services and financial awareness, I made a decision to do something more with my life. I had an idea to start a business but I needed money to begin.”

Florence approached her mentor with a proposal based on advice from the club’s financial awareness module. Makaite gave her $5 which she used to buy a chicken. She slaughtered the chicken and sold the cut pieces, using the proceeds to buy three more chickens and from there on her business has boomed.

“Now I don’t just sell chickens, I also sell sausages and fish. I can do a whole lot of things now; I can take care of myself and my baby, I don’t have to wait for my husband to provide for me.”

As well as encouraging income generation, the Sista-2Sista Club advises girls to complete their education and encourages those who have dropped out, particularly due to teenage pregnancy and early marriage, to return to school.

Florence has high hopes for her education. “I did so well in my O-levels that I want to go back to school to finish my A-levels so I go to college and become a teacher. I want to wait until my baby is older (5/6), but I want to return soon since the knowledge is still fresh in my head.”
In 2012, when Edith Banda (19) was in Form 3, she was forced to drop out of school. Her elderly father could not afford to pay for her school fees at Richmond Secondary School in the rural Makonde district of Zimbabwe’s Mashonaland West Province.

Edith’s father had two wives, with many children to take care of. “My mother was his second wife so as her children we were last in the pecking order,” explained Edith.

“When I had to leave school I thought of getting married as it seemed the only way to solve my problems and make my life better,” admitted Edith.

Fortunately, Edith met Sista2Sista mentor Makaite Maoyise shortly after leaving school. After taking her through the risk assessment, Makaite encouraged Edith to join the Sista2Sista club and decided to speak to her family about their situation.

Makaite spoke to Edith and her mother about what they could do in order to send Edith back to school, advising them on how to begin market gardening.

Edith and her mother took up the project and managed to sell enough vegetables to eventually send Edith back to school. She completed her O-level examinations in 2015 and passed 5 subjects.

“After attending the Sista2Sista Club, I decided not to hurry into marriage. I could get many diseases, fall pregnant too early and further complicate my life before I can even get a handle on it myself.”

Edith is still continuing with her market gardening project with her mother while preparing for her November 2016 A-level exams in English and Accounting.

“If I pass I want to become a policewoman and take care of my siblings and other girls.”
“I decided not to hurry into marriage. I could get many diseases, fall pregnant too early and further complicate my life before I can even get a handle on it myself”
Harmful religious practices in the rural district of Makonde in Zimbabwe’s Mashonaland West province almost destroyed 14 year old Moreblessing Musvondo’s life until she received guidance and assistance from her local Sista2Sista club, a girl’s empowerment club implemented by FACT supported by UNFPA.

Moreblessing and her family are part of the Johane Marange Apostolic Church, one of Zimbabwe’s largest religious groups. The Johane Marange Church advocates for a number of harmful religious practices such as early and polygamous marriages.

Moreblessing’s sister was married into a polygamous marriage within the church in Chinhoyi. When she fell ill in 2014, she asked Moreblessing to come and take care of her. Her mother initially refused because she wanted her to continue going to school in Richmond but her father insisted she go.

“I started to think because of the church that maybe I should drop out of school and get married because that was the church law... But the club has taught me that education can help you to do so much more in life.”

“I stayed with my sister and her husband for a month and I missed out on school. It really pained me that I could not go to school during that month,” recalled Moreblessing.

When her sister had recovered, Moreblessing returned to Richmond to live with her parents. However, soon after that her brother-in-law visited her parents’ house and requested to marry Moreblessing also.

She immediately refused because she wanted to go to school. “I am way too young for that,” she said “I don’t want to marry you!”

However Moreblessing’s father did not feel the same way. “My dad started shouting saying girls should not be going to school and putting education above the church,” a common thinking within the Johane Marange church community.

At the same time, Moreblessing had begun attending the local Sista2Sista club mentored by Makaite. She told Makaite about this pending proposal of marriage to her sister’s husband.
Makaite immediately came home with Moreblessing that very day to speak to her father on the issue. Initially, Moreblessing’s father completely resisted and wouldn’t listen to anything Makaite had to say. However, after a while he became reasonable, he began to listen to Makaite.

“I explained to him the importance of Moreblessing finishing her education and making a living for herself. That she was too young for marriage and this could impede her whole life. Eventually, he listened to me and agreed to end the marriage and to allow Moreblessing to go back to school,” said mentor Makaite.

Moreblessing has since returned to school and continues to be a member of the Richmond Sista2Sista club.

“The Sista2Sista club really helped me, they made me feel like I really had to keep attending and participating. I was starting to think because of the church that maybe I should drop out of school and get married because that was the church law, no matter how old you are or whether you want to get married or not,” said Moreblessing.

“But the club has taught me that education can help you to do so much more in life and even take care of the very same parents that don’t want you to go to school. I am going to finish A-levels so I can one day go to college.”
Cast away by her family at the tender age of 17, Precious Hove found herself in an early forced marriage in a strange community with nothing to her name, relying solely on a reluctant abusive husband. However with the help from the Sista2Sista Club, Precious now finds herself in a much happier place in her life, with her husband and a thriving groundnut business in Rufaro Farm, Hurungwe in Zimbabwe’s Mashonaland West province.

Precious, originally from Kazangarare, an area 60km from Rufaro Farm, met Alan (30), a temporary teacher in the town, when she was just 17 and they began dating. Their puppy love was suddenly escalated into turmoil when Precious returned to her home late one evening (about 7pm). Precious was turned away by her mother and told “dzokera kwawanga uri” meaning “go back to where you were.” In local Shona culture when a girl arrives home late she is sent away with the assumption that she was with a boy-friend. It is assumed that when a boyfriend has kept a girl late into the night he may have deflowered her and must take the girl as his wife. Ejected from her family home with no support, Precious was forced to marry Alan and returned with him to his home in Hurungwe.

Precious found it very difficult to settle into life on the farm especially because her mother in law did not approve of her. Life was also difficult for her because she was not able to give conceive due to some unknown fertility problem to her and the family then. She was seen as barren and isolated by the family and community. Her husband’s infidelity gave her more stress. “I felt like an outsider from the very beginning,” recalls Precious.

To compound her feelings of isolation within the community, Precious suffered domestic violence at the hands of her husband Alan – often the result of early child marriage as girls are not yet self-aware nor have the confidence to stand up and speak out against their partners.

“As well as improving my marriage relationship, communications skills and my health, the club has taught me about budgeting. Before I was totally ignorant about how to use the family income but that has improved.”
Early child marriage devastates the lives of millions of girls across the country each year. Zimbabwe ranks number 41 in the list of countries with an unacceptably high rate of child marriages with 32.8% of girls married before the age of 18.

A Turning Point

Around the same time, Precious was approached by Felistas Gondo, a mentor of the local Sista2Sista club, a girls’ empowerment programme run by FACT supported by UNFPA as part of the Integrated Support Programme, funded by the governments of Britain, Ireland and Sweden.

Launched in September 2013, the programme offers a safe place where vulnerable adolescent girls can speak with mentors and each other about their problems. Girls in the club learn about sexual and reproductive health and rights, financial literacy, and how to navigate difficult social situations, including coercive and abusive relationships. The programme also aims to give girls the confidence and self-esteem to stand up for themselves. The programme is popularly known as the Sista2sista club.

“I learned from a neighbour that a new “Moroora” (daughter-in-law) moved to the farm and was facing difficulties with her in-laws and husband, including domestic violence. I thought she would be a good candidate for the Sista2Sista Club,” said Gondo.

Gondo visited Precious at her homestead and encouraged her to join the Takudzwa (a Shona word meaning “to be raised up”) Sista2Sista club. She carried out a risk assessment with Precious which showed she was indeed at risk of domestic violence and reproductive health issues.
Precious received gender-based violence counselling and couple counselling together with her husband Alan, who was then referred to the Rufaro Farm community leaders’ community dialogue with men on GBV prevention – also supported by UNFPA.

“Our life has changed dramatically since Precious joined the club. We are now staying happily as a couple. The problems we once had are gone thanks to the lessons Precious shared and counselling from the mentor and community leaders. We now live harmoniously,” said Alan.

Precious has benefitted from the clubs sessions on sexual and reproductive health. “I have already gone for cervical cancer screening with the Takudzwa sisters and we are going for couples HIV testing and counselling at the end of next month”. Precious has also received diagnosis and treatment for fertility problem from the local clinic in Hurungwe and plans to start her family soon.

**Livelihood Project**

Living in rural Hurungwe, families like Precious and Alan rely solely on farming for income. Alan is a full-time farmer working in animal husbandry (cattle, goats, chickens) and crop farming (maize, rapoko).

After Gondo took the club through the “Wants and Needs” session on financial awareness and budgeting, Precious was motivated to begin her own income generating project.

“As well as improving my marriage relationship, communications skills and my health, the club has taught me about budgeting. Before I was totally ignorant about how to use the family income but that has improved.”

And improved it has, Precious now has her very own lucrative business, growing ground nuts and producing peanut butter. With assistance from neighbours & friends in the community, she obtained the initial seed and capital to begin growing the ground nuts on their plot in Rufaro Farm.

Alan is very supportive of his wife’s ground nut business. He provides tillage and assists with harvesting and transport from the field. He is very encouraging and sees the business as a great supplement to the family’s income. Thanks to the sista2sista club’s lessons on budgeting and financial awareness, Alan and Precious share the profits from their business and sit down and budget together.

Precious has produced over 450kg of ground nuts from her first harvest and plans on expanding her ground nut harvest for next year. She dreams of one day opening a grocery store in the village selling her produce.
12 year old Chipo Mapfumo [name changed] was lead into a sordid life of engaging in sex work by a relative at the tender age of 11 years old. However thanks to the UN-FPA girls’ empowerment programme the Sista2Sista Club in her district in Zimbabwe’s Mashonaland West Province, Chipo has been saved and is now protected.

Chipo was left with her grandmother at a young age while her parents moved to Gweru, a town in the Midlands Province of Zimbabwe, in search of work. At the age of 11, Chipo’s grandmother noticed that she had started misbehaving. She was not taking her education seriously and hanging around with boys in the local area.

Chipo’s grandmother sent her to live with her aunt, a common cultural practice as the aunt is seen as the family member to discipline and teach younger family members life skills including sexuality issues.

“During the session on ‘Let’s Communicate’ I learned a lot about delaying and refusing sex. I learned to respect my body. My life is now completely different.”

Unfortunately, Chipo’s aunt was involved in sex work. Instead of disciplining her niece and encouraging her to stay in school, Chipo’s aunt forced her into engaging in transactional sex with men.

“I used to go to the local bar with Tete. She would organise men to have sex with me. She kept the money but would give me some.”

A neighbour witnessed what was happening to Chipo and reported this to her grandmother and the deputy headmaster of her school Mr. Matare, who referred Chipo to the district’s Sista2Sista Club run by mentor Betty Wadiya.

Betty took Chipo through the Sista2Sista Club risk assessment tool, finding she was at risk of sexual abuse, gender-based violence and a number of sexual and reproductive health risks such as HIV and STIs due to her engagement in sex work.

Chipo’s case was immediately reported to Child Care Welfare and the police in Murereka. When her aunt heard that a report had been made, she ran away to South Africa and has not returned since. The police are currently looking for the men who abused Chipo.
Mentor Betty also referred Chipo to the local clinic to seek medical assistance and undergo HIV testing and STI screening. Chipo was also given PEP at the clinic. Her results came out negative for HIV and STIs.

Chipo has returned to stay with her grandmother and is receiving counselling from the Sista2Sista club mentor Betty for the awful ordeal she has experienced.

She is still a member of the Sista2Sista club and says she has gained knowledge and awareness about her body and protecting herself.

“During the session on ‘Let’s Communicate’ I learned a lot about delaying and refusing sex. I learned to respect my body. My life is now completely different.”

Deputy Headmaster Mr. Matare said that he sees a major improvement in the girls of Sista2Sista club.

“They are growing as individuals and together as a group, we can really see the benefits of this programme. They are now more self-aware, and self-defensive.”

“I am so happy to be in the Sista2Sista club, it saved my life,” concludes Chipo as she walks away head help up high to play with the rest of her ‘sisters’ in the school yard.
Thirteen year old Ruvheneko [name has been changed] has been through more suffering in the last two years than any girl her age should have. Coerced into engaging sex work by her own aunt at the tender age of 11 years old, she has finally found safety and solace through Sista2Sista programme run FACT through support from UNFPA.

Ruvheneko lived with her mother in Makonde district in Zimbabwe’s Mashonaland West Province. At the age of 11, Ruvheneko was sent to live with her Aunt while her mother went away for work.

Her aunt, 25 years old at the time, used to bring Ruvheneko to the local bars where she engaged in transactional sex with men. Ruvheneko was eventually coerced into engaging in sex by her aunt, who realised men were interested in her young niece.

“I realised that I had very bad friends and that I had to change my friends.”

“I thought it was ok. I was now making money. I used to have a boyfriend, he bought me things like a phone,” said Ruvheneko.

It transpired that Ruvheneko was also being sexually abused by her uncle (her mother’s brother) while staying with her aunt. Ruvheneko did not tell anyone about the abuse as her aunt told her to keep this a secret.

When she returned to live with her mother, Ruvheneko’s mother became angry at her new behaviour. “She found my phone. I said Tete (aunty) bought it for me but my mother realised it was from a boyfriend. She destroyed the phone and she beat me.”

Ruvheneko eventually ran away from her mother’s house, sleeping under a bridge and in the bush with her ‘boyfriends’. Her mother tried to persuade her to come back home and return to school but she did not listen until Ruvheneko’s friend told her about the local Sista2Sista club.

She was referred to Betty Wadiya, the Sista2Sista mentor who took Ruvheneko through the risk assessment tool. She found her at risk of sexual abuse, gender-based violence HIV and STIs.
Once Ruvheneko joined the club she began to open up to her peers and her mentor about the sexual abuse from her uncle and her life living with her aunt. Mentor Betty and Ruvheneko’s mother immediately reported the case to police in 2014. “The biggest problem in this community is sexual abuse of minors. Cases of abuse are reported to the Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP) Victim Friendly Unit (VFU)” said Betty, who is also a Child Care Welfare social worker.

Ruvheneko’s uncle however ran away when it came to his attention that he was wanted by the police and fled to South Africa. Action was to be taken against her aunt for child abuse but she passed away in 2015.

Mentor Betty also took Ruvheneko to Chikuti clinic where she received HIV and STI screening. The results showed that she was HIV negative and had not contracted any sexually transmitted diseases and is receiving ongoing counselling for the abuse she had suffered.

Safely living at home with her mother in Richmond, Ruvheneko has remained in school and is an active member of the Sista2Sista club which she said has “changed her whole life.”

During the S2S session on “Shamwari Yakanaka” (Good Friendship), Ruvheneko said she realised that she was spending time with the wrong people. “I realised that I had very bad friends and that I had to change my friends.”

Now surrounded by a group of 20 girls who she now calls her “sisters”, some of whom had suffered the same experience, she feels safe particularly under the protection and guidance of mentor Betty.

The most significant lesson Ruvheneko has learned through the Sista2Sista club programme is on self-awareness. “As soon as I became a member I learned to become in charge of my own body. There is no one who can temper with me ever again.”
Sista2Sista uses sports and recreation to teach life skills to vulnerable girls, encourage participation and build self-confidence.
Sista2Sista empowers young girls with entrepreneurial skills which have resulted in a number of thriving livelihood projects.
GIRLS ROCK!