

Adolescence and challenges of changing times

A welcome address by the GPI Calabar Centre Coordinator, Prof Bene Madunagu, in Calabar at the 10th Graduation and Public Education Seminar, held on August, 12, 2006, in Calabar

On behalf of the Board of Trustees and management of Girls' Power Initiative (GPI), it is my privilege and honour to welcome you all to this 10th Graduation and Public Education Seminar of Girls' Power Initiative, Calabar Centre.

Let me start by congratulating the 28 young empowered girls who would be graduating today after three (3) years of intensive 3-hours weekly lessons and participatory discussions in GPI.

We are all here to celebrate the success of these girls whose lives have changed for the better in a society that is full of challenges for young people. In today's globalized world, the process of "growing up" in

the pubertal years when children are undergoing exponential growth is with little positive guidance from adults. The lives of youths today are full of a wide range of educational, family, employment and health challenges. They go through experiences that are very different from those of our generation or even one or two generations ago. Adults lack the knowledge to guide the youths since they did not face such experiences, occasioned today by the political economy of globalization and rapid technological advances in the midst of deepening poverty for most families.

There are also more youths than

ever before. The World's Youth 2006 Data Sheet reports that youths, aged 10-24 years, form 33% of the total youth population of 305 million people in Africa. In Nigeria it is 34% of total youth population of 45.4 million, and 20% of unmarried girls, aged 15-19, have had sex as compared to 24% of boys of that age.

Also, 27% of 15-18 sexually active single girls use contraceptives. For married girls aged 15-19, only 2% use contraceptives, while for married young women aged 20-24, just 4% use contraceptives. Thus, young girls of 15-24 years are at risk of sexual and pregnancy-related challenges not faced by young men of same age.

Again, as part of the knowledge about the benefits of education youths spend longer time in school. They seek formal employment at a later age and get married to start having children at a later age than youths of 20 years ago. Many of the youths live in poverty due to lack of gainful employment, family poverty and poor health and they, therefore, constitute the phenomenon of "area boys and area girls" who get recruited as thugs by politicians. This means that young people today face more complex and challenging environment than their peers of 20-30 years ago. They also spend longer time

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• GPI Calabar Centre Coordinator, Prof. Bene Madunagu (with microphone) addresses representatives of the 2006/graduands during the 10th graduation ceremony on August 12, 2006

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preparing for adulthood in a very confused environment of greed, fraud, poverty and unemployment. Hence, young people grow up today in our society, facing greater challenges and risks.

The situation is worse for girls than for boys. Both the rich and even the disadvantaged young men would sexually abuse girls, made vulnerable by poverty. Thus, girls face more health risks on their way to adulthood.

The greater risk in our society today is HIV/AIDS which is increasingly afflicting young people, most especially girls aged 15-29. In addition, unwanted pregnancy due to increasing incidence of sexual abuse has become a serious challenge to adolescent girls. Some would attempt unsafe abortion with fatal outcome and where they carry the pregnancy to term, early child-bearing would lead to serious long-term effects on the quality of life of the mother and child or children.

Young women are also more challenged than young men in achieving long and healthy life. They are vulnerable; they suffer from high levels of reproductive or pregnancy related disorders and tend to stay in school for shorter periods than boys and of course, they face fewer economic opportunities. The human rights of girls are often violated by patriarchal harmful traditional and contemporary practices, e.g FGM and trafficking.

Although at least in Calabar the likelihood of young girls of 18 and below bearing children is reduced,

but the likelihood of sexual initiation prior to marriage has increased. Indeed, it has become a new phenomenon for would-be brides to be coerced to become pregnant before wedding takes place so as to be sure of her fertility. Thus, social pressure and parental desires continue to increase the risk factors for girls.

GPI, in recognition of these life-threatening challenges faced by the girl-child, has continued to remain focused since 1994 in its programme of sexuality, sexual and reproductive health and rights information as well as life management and leadership skills to assist the girls to overcome these challenges.

Our aim is to reduce early sexual activity among adolescent girls by empowering them to take informed decisions to effectively and assertively reduce the risks of early sexual activity and hence sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV/AIDS. Our programmes are also aimed at changing risky behaviours that are injurious to health and increasing their knowledge about healthy behaviours to change their unhealthy

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attitude.

Our emphasis is focused on four major experiences in the lives of young people. These are

schooling/education, health, career/goal in life, and consensual interpersonal relationships, based on mutual respect that would help the girls to maintain and protect their bodily integrity.

When girls develop positively to attain high level of education and career, they can then make good wives to those who deserve them as well as informed mothers of healthy children.

I have taken time to illustrate the challenges girls face in their growing-up years to justify why we are here to celebrate with the young girls graduating from GPI programme today.

It is our belief that having had the patience and interest to remain and complete the three (3) years in GPI, these 2006 graduands, our 10th set in GPI Calabar, are better informed than their peers who have not had such opportunity and, therefore, would be able to resist the risks of early and unprotected sexual activity and hence, avoid unwanted pregnancy and the risk of unsafe abortion. They would remain in school to the highest possible level to be able to secure gainful jobs to become economically independent. We hope that they will have good careers to become leaders in any field of endeavour, utilising the life management and leadership skills they have learned, in GPI.

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To you the graduands, I congratulate you for the successful completion of your programme in GPI. May I remind you that just as it has been with your predecessors, you will face extra challenges than your peers, by those who will deliberately test and tempt you to see if indeed, GPI passed through you. Thus, you carry the burden of demonstrating what you learned in GPI, having been given a voice to challenge what you see as bad. You will have to protect and defend your rights and your bodily integrity. You will have to speak out in defence of the rights of your ignorant peers; comporting yourself, but politely and effectively, asserting your rights in what you are convinced of as the accurate position in any issue. You will have to seize opportunities to share with others, what you have learned to enable them to also protect themselves and overcome the socially constructed risks in the society. You will have to demonstrate politely and with humility, educating others who do not have such knowledge.

Remember that from this day onwards you will join your predecessors in GAA - GPI Alumnae Association. The president or secretary of GAA here will be called upon after you have received your certificate to admit you into GAA and give you information about GAA meetings. Therefore, you all have the opportunity to support

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each other as you go into the world to face challenges that young people today are saddled with. You also have the privilege to continue to enjoy GPI counselling services and of course the GPI Library services. You would always be welcome to share your experiences on the GPI TV programme, the "Girl Child" to serve as an example to your peers.

Remember that it is not how many lessons you attended in GPI that is important, but how you would live your life henceforth as a good GPI ambassador and being a good role model to other young girls out there. I wish you all the strength to live a life that is fruitful, healthy and as empowered women.

Distinguished participants, I once again welcome you to this occasion, the 10th GPI graduation ceremony, and I thank you for your support and presence.

My special thanks go to the girls who have kept faith with us to be in the programme and to the parents who without their support, the girls would not have been in the programme as well as the GPI staff who worked as a team to stimulate the interest of the girls to remain through the programme. The useful information and skills they gave to the girls will surely stand the girls out. To our friends in the media:

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Increase, Kunle, Jude, Vitalis, Rose Ojiji, Vivienne Edet and others who keep up the information flow about GPI activities for continuous public education for girls to utilise the services of GPI, I thank them. To the NGO colleagues who have worked with us in NETCUSA - Network to Curb Sexual Abuse and in CATIP - Coalition Against Trafficking in Persons, and the Cross River State Government for the recognition accorded us on October 1, 2005, for the work we do to protect the rights of young girls in the state, and the Ministry of Education, for the partnership with GPI to extend the implementation of the policy on Sexuality, Family Life and HIV/AIDS to all schools in Cross River State, we thank them all. We have also had support from the Ministry of Health, Youth Development; and Women's Affairs, as well as the management of the CRBC in all of our activities. We sincerely thank all of you and many other individuals and institutions too numerous to mention in a brief welcome note.

Finally, all of the achievements in GPI through my leadership in the past 13 years would not have been possible without the total unflinching support, intellectual inspiration and understanding, love and care of my partner, friend, comrade and husband, Edwin Madunagu and the understanding of my children, Unoma and Ikenna. They all make the sacrifice of constantly missing my presence at home for the time I spend coordinating and thinking through the success and development of GPI.

I thank you all ♀