

# Adolescent Health and Education: Practice and Policy

*A presentation at the Luncheon Dialogue between members of Cross River State House of Assembly and Girls' Power Initiative, on October 15, 2001 in Calabar*

## Overview of Girls' Power Initiative

**G**PI is a non-governmental, non-religious, non-partisan and not-for-profit organisation which engages in the education of adolescent girls, aged between 10 to 18 years in the areas of reproductive health and rights, life management and leadership skills and self-reliance to empower them to make a successful transition into empowered and healthy women.

Our main aim is to promote the health and rights of girls, train them to appreciate and aspire to achieve higher educational status and high professional status as well as mobilise them for social development and participation through quality education, accurate information, analytical skills, research and critical consciousness.

The major activities of GPI include weekly training sessions that involve assessing and documenting current understanding and knowledge among girls on human rights concepts, health issues and personal empowerment, assisting girls to understand and

appreciate their self-identity and self-image and set goals for their future. We also assist girls to identify and critically examine issues of gender prejudices and consequently, be involved in designing and implementing actions towards changing sexist social patriarchal values; conducting educational sessions on personal hygiene and other health,

human rights and gender issues with a set curriculum, publishing and disseminating quarterly newsletters; relevant information leaflets, books, pamphlets, etc. Conducting school-based discussions, holiday programmes, economic skills training, conducting counselling sessions and referrals, taking girls on excursions to expose them to various careers and professions and effectively participating in local, regional and international levels on issues of health, human rights and women empowerment.

GPI was founded in 1993 by Bene E. Madunagu and Grace Osakue, who had been at the leadership of the women's feminist movement in Nigeria. GPI is located in two centres, Benin-City - South-West Zone and Calabar, South-East Zone, which also houses the national secretariat.

## Context of Adolescent Education, Sexual and Reproductive Health in Cross River State and in Nigeria

Female education is very much of

a recent history in Nigeria. We can say that in most homes, both boys and girls get registered in primary schools almost equally at least in the urban areas. However, while most boys remain in school until the university level, many girls do not go beyond secondary school level for several reasons. Adolescent girls face serious educational and health problems and these include:

- Early sexual initiation and unsafe sexual practices,
- unwanted pregnancies
- unsafe abortion resulting in high mortality rates among adolescent girls
- sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS
- harmful traditional practices
- early marriage
- gender discrimination
- sexual violence, e.g rape
- trafficking; among others.

These problems informed the creation of Girls' Power Initiative.

1. It is of note that at the Fourth World Conference on Women, popularly referred to as Beijing

Conference, it was the African countries with Nigeria playing prominent role, that introduced the chapter on "The Girl-Child" in the Beijing Platform for Action (PFA) in order to commit governments to take action to address the problems enumerated above. Five years after the Beijing Conference, in 2000, the UN held



• GPI SE Co-ordinator, Bene Madunagu (standing) and the Assembly members (Continued on P 36)



## REPORT OF ACTIVITIES

# Adolescent health and education

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the conference - the 5-year review or Beijing +5 where further actions were reiterated to protect girls and women. In the second week of September 2001, GPI published four volumes of simplified versions of the Beijing PFA and the Beijing +5 actional provisions and a copy of each was given to each Honourable Member of the Cross River state House of Assembly to assist in policy action by the legislators for the implementation of the provisions of these documents.

GPI would like to seize this opportunity to commend the Cross River State Government for the bold step it took to make law against Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), child marriage and child defilement. We are proud and happy for the contribution we made in this regard. We are empowered by this action to have hope in similar bills to address other issues negatively affecting girls and women in Cross River State.

**2. Widowhood rites:** We had earlier made a submission on this matter to the honourable house and we are hopeful that it will receive urgent attention.

**3. Trafficking:** we are currently engaged in research and documentation in both Cross River and Edo States. Our preliminary findings in Cross River State are alarming. I will request our Research Assistant, Ndodeye Bassey to give us a short briefing on this issue. This is another area that requires political action to reduce the risks faced by girls in Cross River State.

**4. Sexuality education in schools in Cross River State:** In a meeting between the honourable chairmen of the House Committees on Education

and Human Rights and Girls' Power Initiative on October 10, 2001, I made a presentation on this matter.

In 1996, GPI served as a member of the National Guidelines for Comprehensive Sexuality Education in Nigeria Task Force. By 1999, the Document was adopted by the National Council on Education and given to the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council, NERDC, for incorporation into the curriculum of Nigerian schools. On August 17, 2001, the NCE approved the curriculum for upper primary schools, junior secondary schools, senior secondary schools and tertiary institutions in Nigeria as produced by NERDC. This again requires political action by the honourable house to pass a bill. GPI has the expertise and skills in sexuality education to assist in training teachers in Cross River State for this programme to take off. I hereby present a copy, each of these documents to you Mr speaker sir, to guide your necessary action.

**5. Female Genital Mutilation:** There is a law in Cross River State against this act, but the implementation of the law is another issue. We in GPI, have within our limited resources, utilised the law for affirmative action to eliminate the problem in two communities, each in Cross River and Edo States. If assisted with required resources, we are willing to extend this action to other parts of the state where the problem still exists.

**6. Gender violence - Rape:** Presently, we have followed up on a number of rape cases within the city of Calabar. All the ones so far are cases with girls under the age of 16 - all statutory rape. There is need for

review of the law on rape to protect these children.

**7. Teenage pregnancy:** In our Social/Community Intervention in the state, we came across very high incidence of teenage pregnancy in Iking, Akpabuyo Local government area. Our investigation for instance showed that there is no secondary school near this large community and the young girls therefore, face sexual exploitation from soldiers camped in Iking over the Bakassi issue.

**8. HIV/AIDS:** The culture of using girls as ushers and for protocol officers to "arrange" young girls and young women of school age for government officials visiting the state for diverse purposes, expose these girls to HIV/AIDS infection. The report of the 1999 HIV/syphilis Sentinel Sero-Prevalence survey by the Nigerian National AIDS and STDS control Programme recorded that in 1998 alone, 60% of the 20,334 AIDS cases in Nigeria were within the ages of 15-25 years. Cross River State came 6th in the HIV/AIDS prevalence study out of the 36 states. By the last AIDS conference in 2001, Cross River state had risen to the 2nd position. This rate is indeed alarming enough for serious political action. Both the girls and the men exploiting them as well as the families of those men are at risk.

This, in brief, contains some of the experiences we have come across in our work in Cross River State. We hope that these issues will be addressed with a view to finding solutions to save the future of this state.

Thank you distinguished guests for your presence and patience.



By  
Bene E. Madunagu