

## SOUTH EAST GRADUATION ADDRESS

# Adolescents' health and their future: the role of GPI

*Address presented on the occasion of the 3rd graduation and 5th anniversary of Girls' Power Initiative, (GPI) South East zone at Paradise City Hotel, Atekong Drive, Calabar, on Saturday July, 24, 1999*

**I**t is with much pleasure and a deep sense of appreciation that I welcome you all today July 24, 1999 to this memorable dual event marking the 3rd Graduation Ceremony of GPI South East zone and the 5th year of our programme. Our first lesson started on July 24, 1994. I acknowledge the presence of our well-deserving Seeders' '99, the graduating group of 1999. I welcome with appreciation the parents, guardians and friends of our graduating girls, other NGOs here present, our graduands, members of the press and our staff in GPI.

Girls' Power Initiative is our attempt to implement the Programme of Action (POA) of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), acknowledged that "the reproductive health needs of adolescents should be based on information that helps them attain a level of maturity required to make responsible decisions"; that "In particular, information and services should be made available to adolescents to help them understand their sexuality and protect them from unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases and subsequent risk of infertility". In paragraph 7.47, it is stated that "Governments, in collaboration with non-governmental organization, are urged to meet the special needs of adolescents and to establish appropriate programmes to respond to those needs. Such programmes should include support mechanisms for the education and counselling of adolescents in the area of gender relations and equality, violence against adolescents,

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*GPI S. E. Coordinator holds the shield presented to the organisation by the Graduands, Seeders '99 in appreciation of what GPI has done for them. July 24, 1999, 3rd GPI South-East Graduation.*

responsible sexual behaviour, responsible family-planning practice, family life, reproductive health, sexually transmitted diseases, HIV infection and AIDS prevention. Programmes for the prevention and treatment of sexual abuse and incest and other reproductive health services should be provided..."

In response to this global agreements, the Nigerian Government drafted a Policy of Adolescent Reproductive Health in 1995. To articulate strategies and draw up a framework for implementation of this Policy to address the reproductive health needs of Nigerian Adolescents, the

Federal Ministry of Health in collaboration with Action Health Incorporated (AHI), International agencies and NGOs covered a National

Conference on Adolescent Reproductive Health in Abuja in Nigeria January, 1999. GPI was well represented from both the South East and South West zones. As reported in "Growing Up", the Newsletter of Action Health Incorporated vol. 7 No. 1, March, 1999, the conference was organised to provide an opportunity for all stakeholders to gain an increased understanding of the strategic issues involved in promoting

adolescent reproductive health, sexuality and development. It provided a forum for sharing of "best practices" and articulating a gender-sensitive programme of action for operationalising the reproductive health component of the National Adolescent Health Policy with input from all stakeholders.

### What is and Why GPI?

GPI is the acronym for Girls' Power Initiative, a non governmental, non profit-making, non religious, non partisan and non exploitative organisation. The primary purpose of

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GPI is to inform and educate girls of ages 10-18 years about their sexuality, their sexual and reproductive health and rights. This focus is anchored on our firm conviction that each female-girl or woman has the fundamental rights to control her own sexuality, her own fertility and hence her health, her well-being and her future without coercion, discrimination or violence.

It is this conviction that has made us remain steadfast in the execution of our programmes with indeed no time to space to respond to prejudices, misinformation and misrepresentation of what we do or don't do. Our products, our girls remain our testimonies to justify our existence.

The word power in our name is a constant reminder of our full potentials as human beings and our capacity to take positive action as girls and women in the interest of our health and our future. The word initiative in our name strictly conforms to its dictionary definition - "the Power or opportunity to act or take act or take charge before other people do; the capacity and imagination to realise what needs to be done, together with the courage and willingness to do it especially without the help of others". Our girls have been trained to respect the guidance, support, advise and responsibilities of their parents, guardians, teachers, and other relations but they also learned that as human beings, the final decision of taking positive action for a healthy living and an empowered high status in future is ultimately theirs. It is their rights to receive good and relevant education. It is the duties and responsibilities of their parents and the government to ensure their proper education but it remains their responsibilities to utilise the opportunity given by the parents and government to

take positive action to guarantee their healthy living and a bright and dignified future.

### What does GPI do?

One thing GPI does very well is that we conduct all our activities during the day and in very public and open places such as African Club Hall, Paradise City Garden, the Museum, and the Cultural Centre. We have a regular "GPI on Air" radio programme as well as produce regular quarterly Newsletters to publicise what we do and increase our coverage of public education. At this point I would like to publicly acknowledge the excellent support and media coverage of all our activities by Jude Okwe of Post Express Newspaper. He certainly comes first among his other colleagues in this regards. Others who have demonstrated similar media support are Kunle Johnson of the Monitor and Vitalis Ugoh of The New Nigeria. A few others are now catching on.

**W**e recognise that girls are socialised to aspire to sexist professions and are told that there are professions that are not for females. One of the things we do therefore is to take them on excursions to various institutions to learn about other life careers and professions and what it takes to be such professionals. They have found out that there is no profession in the universe that takes as criteria, what differentiates females from male. They have learned that what any human being is trained to do, she or he can do it. They have also learned that they could be company directors and still be good wives and mothers. They have learned in our regular weekly lessons that ignorance about someone's sexuality, sexual and reproductive health and rights and poor inaccessible services constitute the main reasons for high maternal mortality,

teenage pregnancy, unsafe abortion, child marriage, school drop out and all the thinkable indicators of poor health and low self esteem and low status of women.

When we advise girls not to succumb to pressure to accept money and gifts in exchange for their bodily integrity, we are aware that poverty can supercede our advise and cause a girl to satisfy her need sometimes including food and school fees at the expense of her health. We therefore incorporate skills training as part of our education so that girls can produce simple material needs and sell some to make some income to meet their other needs.

Knowing that all the adolescent girls require the GPI information and education, but many are for various reason unable to come to our centres, we conduct lessons in schools and we now have an intensive one-week holiday programme for such girls. Probably our girls have had more positive intervention in our communities than even some adults in assisting underserved and underprivileged with information and education about their lives. The Seeders '99 graduating today have carried out social work at Asabanka community educating women and girls as part of their graduation requirement.

Aware that approximately 22 million Nigerians, more than 20% of Nigerian's population of over 100 million are between the ages of 10 and 19 and that they are constantly exposed and pressurised into dangerous health risks including Sexually Transmitted Diseases and HIV/AIDS, teenage pregnancies, incest, rape and various forms of sexual abuse, violence and harmful traditional practices, we are committed to the work we do in GPI.

### To the graduands:

Seeders' 99, you owe your alma mata of empowerment, rights and health information and gender sensitive

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education certain responsibilities as you formally ceases to be regular members of GPI today. You owe us a commitment to keeping the rules of personal hygiene, responsible sexual behaviour, mutual respect and most importantly remaining polite but firm and assertive in what is right to ensure good health and high self esteem and self worth. You owe us a commitment to share what you have learned with every person female or male, young or old who may be literate or old but ignorant of the life management skills you have learned. Remember that aggressiveness and being passive are attributes you must not possess anymore. We urge you to remember that in school or in your workplace, everyone may not be your friend, but you must treat everyone with mutual respect and

non-judgmental attitude. The people in your schools or at work place are not gathered by you so they cannot possibly be all your friends but they have equal rights to be there as you. The only option is mutual respect to avoid stress and therefore ill-health.

Rest assured that if anyone of you or groups of you wishes (wish) to form seed groups to replicate the strategies of GPI and expand the coverage of leadership skills and information on sexuality, sexual and reproductive health and rights to your peers, we will support you morally and materially to the best of our ability. You have open membership to our library to increase your knowledge. You will be invited to our public activities and you are still free to seek our counselling services. It is our hope in future to provide internships for all our graduands who wish to benefit

from such facility. Together we will expand the GPI agenda and work for gender justice in Nigeria. May I seize this moment to pay tribute to all the GPI staff, and to my greatest supporter in the execution of my programme my trusted adviser, my friend, my partner, my husband Edwin Madunagu who is my closest ally and who bears patiently and with his full support, my numerous travels in advancing the work I do for GPI. My thanks also to my daughter, Unoma Madunagu, who is graduating today and my son Ikenna Madunagu both of whom have to put up with my numerous absences in pursuit of a future for GPI.

Finally, my thanks to all the GPI girls and the graduands for trusting in us and being steadfast and patient with us as we put them through the various lessons completely different from their school curriculum. We will always strive to meet your needs. To the graduands I extend my hearty congratulations.

I wish you all success in life and a healthy living. Thank you all. ♀