

# Empowering adolescent girls through comprehensive sexuality education

*Prof Bene Madunagu GPI Coordinator, Calabar/Uyo Centres, made this presentation at the 9th graduation and public education ceremony, organized by GPI Calabar Centre at the Marian Hotel, Calabar, on Saturday, August 6, 2005*

The celebrants - GPI 9th set of graduands, distinguished invitees, our special guests of honour, NGO representatives, our media friends, GPI staff, ladies and gentlemen, it is my pleasure to welcome you all to this occasion of the 9th graduation and public education event.

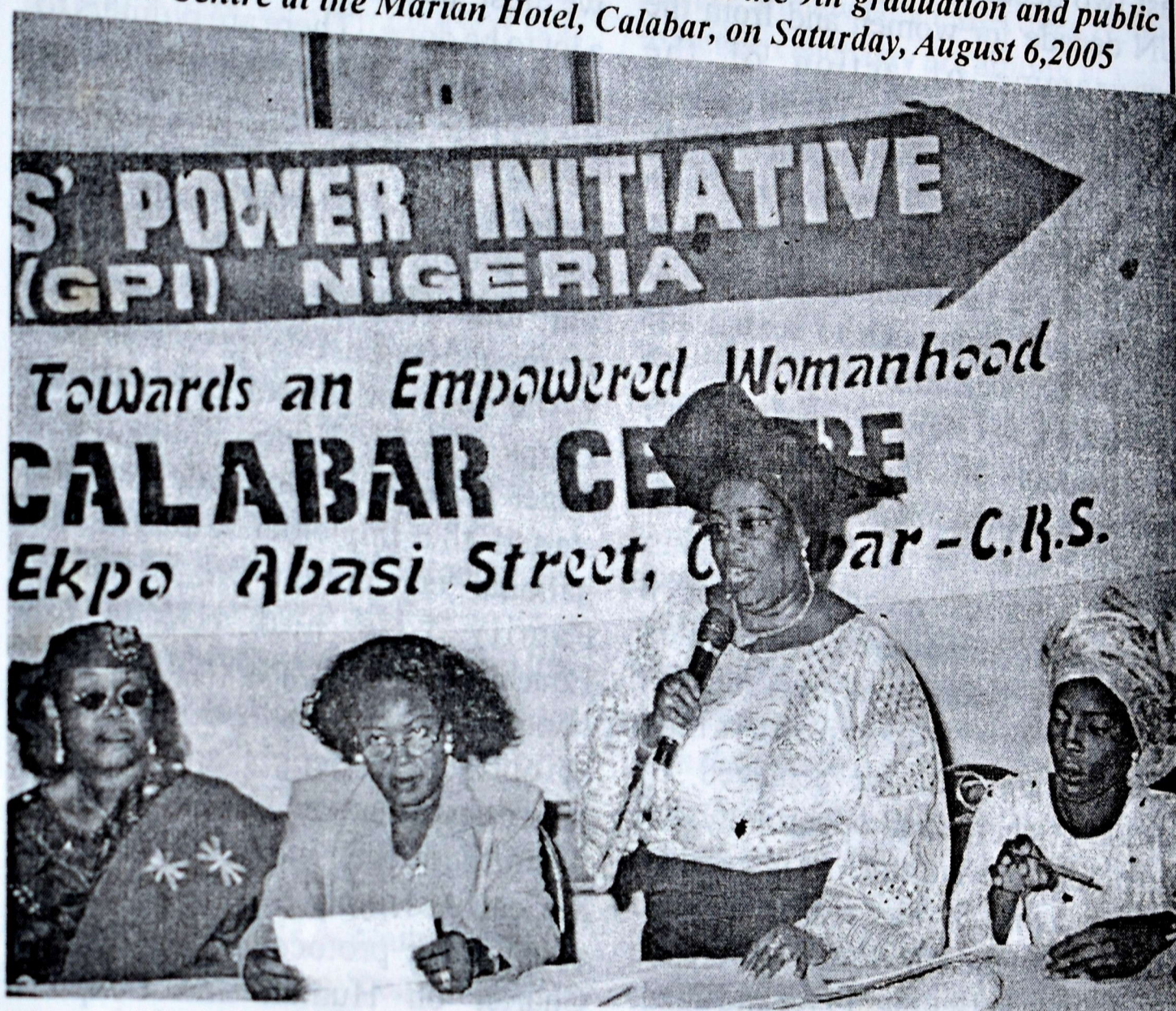
I am deeply touched and extremely delighted to witness this strong support for the work we do with our girls by your honouring of our invitation and being present at this occasion.

Since inception, GPI has remained focused in its approach of comprehensive sexuality and human rights education, from a gender perspective, to empower adolescent girls between the ages of 10 - 18 years in a three-year programme for each set of girls admitted into GPI.

The programme is comprehensive, because it covers all aspects of adolescents' needs for their development - educational, skills and social issues. Education, as defined by the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* is "a process of teaching, training and learning to improve knowledge and develop skills. It involves building capacities, developing talents, and building competencies for social transformation.

Sexuality is a broad term that deals with all aspects of human life, human relationships, from birth to death. It involves the pleasure of living and being healthy, as well as attributes to reduce tension. Sexuality is natural and positive.

Sexuality education primarily promotes mutual respect, gender equality and the rights of all persons



• Prof Bene Madunagu, delivering her speech at the 9th GPI graduation and public education ceremony, held on August 6, 2005 at the Marian Hotel, Calabar

to their sexual and reproductive health and well-being. Thus, sexuality education is not for prevention of diseases, but as a right to healthy pleasurable living, free from fear, shame, coercion through careful decision-making from an informed position.

Comprehensive sexuality education, therefore, goes beyond focus on problems and challenges that young people face, into activities that promote young people as assets and agents of social development. It provides them with information to engage in positive leadership and life management skills development. It helps young people to build their individual competence, skills and good qualities to make a healthy transition

into adulthood.

Our priorities in GPI, therefore include educating and empowering girls:

- To life management and leadership skills for healthy living.
- To achieve their rights to protection from acts that interfere with their health, education, personal growth and development.
- To understand and claim their rights to be protected from indecent and inhuman treatment, including all forms of sexual abuse, child labour, maltreatment and neglect.
- To understand and claim their rights to be protected from discrimination on the basis of sex, origin, social status, etc.

We have a strong belief that all these  
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are possible. This belief comes from the changes we have witnessed in the last two decades, beginning from the UN decade for women and from the programme of action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), Cairo, Egypt in 1994, which has been popularly described as a watershed as result of the far reaching outcome of rights-based approach to sexual and reproductive health. This ICPD, POA reflected a new global policy consensus on the relationships between population policy and sexual and reproductive health and rights. The consensus recognised that if women are empowered and people's needs for sexual and reproductive health are met, population stabilization will be achieved by virtue of choice and opportunity, not coercion and control. This rights-based approach was reaffirmed and extended at the 4th World Conference on Women in Beijing, 1995, and again in their +5 follow-up documents.

We cannot but admit to the involvement and participation of women in all areas of human endeavours. Women have found a voice in their families, communities and in the public, political, social and economic arena. The girls being trained in GPI will ensure that this trend continues towards achievement of empowered womanhood.

*The celebrants today, the GPI 9th set of graduands, the ones before them, those following on their foot-steps of being steadfast and serious with their lessons in GPI in our four centres - Calabar, Uyo, Asaba and Benin-City, give us hope.*

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While acknowledging progress, we must also admit that there is still a lot to be done. There are pointers to give us hope. The celebrants today, the GPI 9th set of graduands, the ones before them, those following on their foot-steps of being steadfast and serious with their lessons in GPI in our four centres - Calabar, Uyo, Asaba and Benin-City, give us hope.

The governments of Cross River, Lagos, Enugu, Kano, Plateau and Niger States that have adopted and started the implementation of the national curriculum on Sexuality, Family Life and HIV/AIDS Education further provide us with hope for positive changes in the lives of our young people and in their future development.

Furthermore, in July 2003, the African Assembly of Heads of State adopted the protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa. A year later, the Assembly adopted the solemn declaration on gender equality in Africa, where African leaders made a commitment to ratify the Protocol.

In 2004, an African woman, Professor Wangari Maathai won Nobel Peace Prize. With specific reference to the girl-child, one of the twelve critical areas of the Beijing Platform for Action was on the girl-child. This year, 2005 marks the 10th anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action. Countries gathered in New York in March, 2005 to share and compare progress of the implementation of the Beijing PFA.

There is much in terms of policy at the global, regional, national and state levels to ensure pleasurable and healthy sexuality for everyone, particularly girls and women who have all along suffered from institutionalized discriminatory

practices at all levels - in the family, in school, in communities and in the society at large. Girls and women still face enormous challenges in their daily lives.

As we have been informed, the latest sero-prevalence survey to determine the state of the HIV/AIDS epidemic was carried out between September and December, 2003.

The survey recorded a decline in HIV prevalence in six states, namely - Benue, Akwa Ibom, Nasarawa, Ebonyi, Edo and Imo States. On the other hand, five states, namely, Yobe, Jigawa, Abia, Sokoto, and Cross River States showed increasing prevalence.

Young people aged 15 - 24 years were found to form a large proportion of those infected, with prevalence of 4.1% for ages 15 - 19; 5.7% for ages 20 - 24 and 5.6% for ages 25-29. The prevalence of HIV differed considerably among states. It varied from as high as 12.0% for Cross Rivers State to as low as 1.25% for Osun State. The survey was among over 27,000 women attending ante-natal clinic within Nigeria from the 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory.

Other data are that girls and young women are often denied the formal education and employment

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opportunities, which enhance decision-making skills, which can help them to delay marriage and pregnancy, and refuse unwanted sexual activity.

Throughout the world, most males

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and females become sexually active during adolescence. However, most young people lack accurate knowledge about reproduction and

sexuality and do not have access to reproductive health information and services. During adolescence, females are exposed to a new set of health risks. Lack of knowledge about their bodies and limited access to appropriate health services put them at risk of early child-bearing, unwanted pregnancy, unsafe abortion as well as sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV/AIDS.

In Nigeria, seven out of 10 males and five out of 10 females in secondary schools are sexually active. Again, an estimated 905,000 births to adolescents occur annually. Approximately 14 million children are born to adolescent females each year; i.e. 10% of all births, worldwide. The physical immaturity of these young mothers increases their risk of death and serious disability. Pregnancy-related complications are among the major causes of death for girls, aged 15-19, worldwide.

Pregnant girls, aged 15 and under, have a mortality rate of seven times higher than that of women, aged 20-24 years and 5 million unsafe abortions take place among adolescent girls, aged 15 - 19 years; i.e. a quarter of all unsafe abortions, world wide.

Adolescent girls account for 80% of unsafe abortion complications treated in hospitals in Nigeria.

Globally, one out of every 20 adolescents gets an STD each year. Half of all new HIV cases over 7,000 infections each day are among young people, aged 10 -24 years. Girls face considerable health risk, often resulting from family preference for boys. Millions of girls do not receive sufficient preventive health care or treatment for illness and are poorly fed. An estimated 450 million adult women in developing countries are stunted, a result of malnutrition in early life. Adolescent girls and young women experience violence disproportionately. Violence affects females throughout their life cycle.

In childhood, girls may be subjected to child marriage, sexual abuse and female genital mutilation (FGM). In the course of a woman's life, she may be subjected to forced pregnancy; emotional, physical or sexual abuse by relatives, partners, spouse or non-family members; sexual harassment, trafficking and rape; estimated 40-

58% of sexual assaults are committed against girls, aged 15 years and younger. Usually by family members or someone the victim knows.

It was in realization of the fact that young girls face these peculiar problems that Girls' Power Initiative (GPI) was founded in 1993. GPI started regular weekly lessons in 1994 for adolescent girls, aged 10-18 years.

GPI addresses the problems of adolescent girls through comprehensive sexuality education, from a gender perspective with the aim to: Assist the girls to take action to overcome the risk to their health, arising from gender violence and discrimination.

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• GPI Shining Stars Group girls present a ballad at the 9th graduation & public education ceremony, held on August 6, 2005 at the Marian Hotel, Calabar

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- Build their leadership skills to overcome subservient roles and take on active engagement on equal basis with their male peers.
- Sensitize them to take social actions and educate their peers on risky behaviours harmful to their health.
- Give information that will assist them to struggle against harmful traditional practices and claim their rights as human beings.
- Give information through participatory learning approach to impart life management skills and help them overcome stereotypes.

There can be no significant or sustainable transformation in societies and no significant reduction in poverty until girls receive the quality of basic education they need to take their rightful place as equal partners in development.

Educating girls, therefore, is the best investment for social development. The short and long-term benefits to girls are based on the evidence that educated girls develop essential life management skills like; self-confidence, the ability to participate effectively in society and protect themselves from sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS; sexual exploitation and pressure for early marriage and childbirth.

Adolescent girls should seek to be able to read, write and compete in all spheres of life. They should be able to remain free of diseases, disability or death associated with sexuality or sexual and reproductive

health and rights. Adolescent girls have the right of access to comprehensive education and correct age-specific information on reproductive health, rights and responsibilities. This must be gender-sensitive, free from stereotypes and presented in an objective, non-judgemental and a constructively critical manner.

All adolescent girls have the right to sufficient education and information to ensure that any decision they make relating to their sexual and reproductive life, career and future status, marriage and child-bearing are made with full, free and informed consent. Adolescent girls have the right to be provided with full information about STIs, including HIV/AIDS and Pelvic Inflammatory Diseases (PIDs). Adolescent girls have the right to be fully involved in all aspects of the development of their lives and that of their communities as leaders and as equal participants.

True freedom and the exercise of these rights can only be achieved in a just society with gender justice, equality and equity. Young people, to every right is a responsibility. Having been fully informed about sexuality, sexual and reproductive health and rights and having received the skills to manage your life, you as adolescents, have the following responsibilities:

- Responsibility to have a healthy lifestyle and take pride in protecting your bodily integrity.
- Responsibility not to participate in risky

behaviours injurious to your health.

- Responsibility to seek healthcare from skilled and trained healthcare providers, located in clean, hygienic environment.

- Responsibility not to exchange your bodily integrity for material needs out of greed.
- Responsibility to use information you get to protect yourself and reduce the risks to your health and life and stay healthy.
- Responsibility to share information, education and skills you learn with your peers.
- Responsibility to be open and honest about your problems and weaknesses be they academic, health, emotional, etc.
- Responsibility to remain in good health and quality well-being, maintaining your self-identity and image.
- The responsibility to study hard and pass your examinations.
- The responsibility to determine to remain in school and complete your studies.

These responsibilities should be taken seriously because they enhance the possibility for young girls to stay in school and complete their studies, achieve their goals in life, become empowered women in future, thus contributing to their self-growth and national development. ♀