

GRADUATION ADDRESS

Girls' right to healthy sexuality: GPI's experience

Professor Bene Madunagu, GPI Coordinator, Cross River and Akwa Ibom States made this speech at the 7th graduation ceremony of GPI, Calabar Centre, on Saturday, August 2, 2003 in Calabar

GIRLS' Power Initiative, GPI graduands, distinguished invitees, our media friends, GPI staff, NGO representatives, I am deeply touched by your support to GPI in accepting our invitation to this memorable and historic occasion of our 7th graduation ceremony.

It is with much delight and pleasure that I welcome you all to this event to witness and bear testimony to the outcome of our struggle to ensure that adolescent girls in Nigeria receive necessary information and skills to claim and enjoy their rights to healthy sexuality.

Girls' Power Initiative, GPI is a non-governmental, non-religious, non-sectarian and not-for-profit adolescent educational and development organisation. Since my colleague, Grace Osakue, Coordinator Edo and Delta States Centres of GPI and I, created GPI in 1993, GPI has remained focused in utilising the approach of gender-sensitive, comprehensive sexuality and human rights education to empower girls between the ages of 10-18 years in a 3-year programme that provides non-sexist life management and leadership skills to the beneficiaries.

We provide accurate information on human sexuality, sexual and reproductive health and rights. We offer counselling and referral services for the promotion and protection of the sexual and reproductive health and rights of both in and out-of-school adolescent girls. Presently, we are located in 4 of the 6 states of the South-South geo-political zone of

Nigeria, namely Cross River, Akwa Ibom, Edo and Delta States. The national secretariat is located here in Calabar.

Our priorities are to assist young girls

- * to recover their courage lost in the process of sexist socialisation
- * to assist them to acquire life management skills for healthy living
- * to enable them to achieve their rights and be visible as agents of development and positive social change

* to empower them to overcome the many social changes imposed on them by the patriarchal society we live in. These challenges include: overcoming the risks of early sexual activity, teenage pregnancy, unsafe abortion, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), HIV/AIDS, rape and other forms of sexual abuse and exploitation, harmful traditional practices such as female genital mutilation, bride price, son-preference, challenges of internal and external trafficking in girls and forced prostitution. In summary, our primary objective lies in fostering wellness, growing-up healthy and enjoyment of their human sexuality responsibly towards an empowered womanhood. We run programmes in our 4 centres in the 4 states we operate in, as well as in 50 secondary schools.

We also reach out to parents, guardians, teachers and the public through forums targeted specifically at the appropriate audience as well as through radio, TV and the print media including our various publications and IEC materials. Our aim is to sensitize

and generate support for the girls in acting out what they learn to live healthy lives within the values and limits they set for themselves.

Through our Gender Development Institute (GDI) which we run two sets of training courses in a year for both women and men since 1999, we have also been building the capacity of NGO workers, policy makers, teachers, media practitioners and other stakeholders, from a gender perspective to support issues of reproductive health and rights and promote gender equality.

Our strength lies in our primary beneficiaries in the 4 states of over 15,000 in and out of school girls; our graduates who number over 300 at both Calabar and Benin centres whom we are yearly adding to the team of GPI graduates; our relationship of mutual trust and support with parents of GPI girls as well as with school management and functionaries who embrace GPI programmes, policy makers, and media friends our committed and resourceful staff and other friends in the society.

Perhaps, our strongest point is our faith in the positive development of our girls and youths in general, if properly guided rather than waiting to solve problems. We have found out in our 9 years of existence that educating girls from puberty as they are growing up, in gender-sensitive, comprehensive sexuality and human rights education will empower them not only to go through adolescence into adulthood with minimal crisis and

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mistakes and the unlikelihood of contracting HIV/AIDS, or dying from unsafe abortion or dropping out of school for adolescent pregnancy but it also empowers them to deal with challenges from informed and assertive position, prepared to grow into self-assured and healthy young women, experiencing healthy sexuality. This way, they are able to articulate options and make the right choices in challenging circumstances. They, therefore, stand out as model social change agents.

Our strategies, assumptions and outcomes

Our main strategy has remained our weekly educational sessions with the girls. Our assumptions in relation to this strategy have been that:

- * Parents and guardians would approve of GPI activities and permit their daughters and wards to attend the lessons.
- * Girls need "girls only" safe space and information that are useful, full of fun activities that would endure a 3-year programme.
- * That applying gender-sensitive and interactive and participatory methodologies would induce girls to break their silence, overcome shyness and open up to share and learn new things.
- * That a non-formal educational approach of sexuality education would interest girls to remain in the programme.
- * That GPI information is transformative and can be used by girls to make informed choices and recognise and claim their rights to healthy sexuality.

In nine years, we have seen girls in the programme acquire the ability to

recognise and change risky behaviours. Girls have become assertive and focused, even in their academic choices. They have been helped to take on leadership roles and to make informed decisions in the interest of their well-being. They now recognise and challenge gender-based violence. They share accurate information with their peers directly in their communities and through TV, radio and the GPI newsletter. They also acquire public speaking skills and develop positive changes in attitudes and beliefs. They can equally now challenge gender discrimination and prejudices and reject and resist harmful traditional practices such as FGM as well as sexist gender roles. The girls can defend their peers against exploitation and speak out on their behalf. They seek out and encourage, and bring non-GPI girls who are victims of STIs and sexual violence to GPI for counselling and information.

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Our girls and graduates have chosen to postpone marriage to stay in school to achieve higher educational levels towards empowered womanhood. They understand that they have a choice of being good professionals in careers they choose and still be good wives and mothers.

No GPI girl has become pregnant, face the risk of unsafe abortion nor has any been diagnosed to be HIV-positive in our nine years of regular lessons to the girls. Some who were sexually active, make a choice to abstain after receiving GPI lessons. Many have stopped relationships premised on sexual exploitation. Our graduates seek and pursue male-dominated professions.

We certainly have created a mass of gender-sensitive healthy adolescent girls and young women who know their rights and who act as catalysts of change in their communities; girls who will have a place in Nigerian history as positive change agents and social transformation of our patriarchal culture. Our girls and graduates have chosen to postpone marriage to stay in school to achieve higher educational levels towards empowered womanhood. They understand that they have a choice of being good professionals in careers they choose and still be good wives and mothers.

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Sexuality education: To be or not to be?

Exactly a year ago, in this same hall, on August 3, 2002 when we had our 6th graduation ceremony, in my address at that occasion, I informed participants that the Federal Government of Nigeria, through the Federal Ministry of Education in collaboration with the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) had approved the National Sexuality Education Curriculum for upper primary; junior and senior secondary schools and tertiary institutions, on August 17, 2001.

This step by the Federal Government was the culmination of a long process that started in 1996 with very wide consultations involving NGOs, religious leaders, schools system functionaries, etc. It was based on the conviction that comprehensive sexuality education would assist adolescents to face up to tough challenges of working hard to do well in school, resisting negative peer pressure, making responsible and informed decisions about sexual activity and sexuality to enable them to achieve their set goals in life as responsible citizens, resisting experimenting on alcohol and drugs, resisting risks of sexual abuse and exploitation, developing open and responsible inter-personal relationship all of which are related to their sexuality.

It is based on the knowledge that sexuality is not just sexual activity but that it encompasses human growth and development, emotions, relationship from birth to death, sexual

health, reproductive health, sexual behaviour, issues of violence against girls and women. Sexuality is an important part of who a person is as female or male, including how one feels about one's body and how one expresses oneself. Sexuality is a natural process and an integral part of being human.

Sexuality education, therefore, is consciously planned as an all embracing teaching about biological, psychological, socio-cultural and spiritual aspects of peoples' lives. Thus, knowledge of human sexuality is important to enable young people in particular to develop skills and positive attitudes that will help them make responsible choices for healthy living because sexuality addresses the pleasures and joys of human life as well as the fears and undesirable challenges such as gender-based violence, sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS.

Before the adoption of the comprehensive sexuality education, population education and family life

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education were found to be limited with little in their content to guide young people in their growing-up years to develop healthy approach to their lives.

It is therefore, totally irresponsible and very incomprehensible for any informed person or persons to backslide from the pressure of a few selfish sectarian uninformed bigots to deny Nigerian children of their rights to comprehensive sexuality education that has been shown to be in the best interest of their development. The drama that is presently unfolding is similar to the two weeks of informal negotiations in Cairo in 1994 over the phraseology of "Fertility regulation" which resulted in the consensus of "Regulation of fertility."

Now to the celebrants - the GPI 7th set of graduates

On behalf of management and staff of Girls' Power Initiative, I sincerely congratulate you all who are graduating today from GPI. Consider yourself as achievers as you well know that up to half of you in the final year did not graduate today. Our criteria

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for graduation may be flexible but it necessarily must ensure that each graduate can comfortably use the information we give for her healthy development and pursuit of the goal she has set for herself to become an empowered and critically conscious woman.

To this end, you can only qualify by being responsible, serious and regular to be part of all the topics in the curriculum discussed from year one to graduation in year 3. You also have to satisfy the criteria of social intervention and community service for us to be sure that as you go into the society you will live by example inculcated by GPI and that you will not be subjected to gender discrimination without fighting back.

We want also to be certain that you have established mutually respectful communication with your parents, friends and your general social network. Above all, that you will be a good ambassador of GPI, someone who will not be overwhelmed by challenges and mixed messages that the system generates to confuse the young ones. We in GPI have played our part and offered you our expertise and resources to prepare you for healthy sexuality and empowered womanhood with minimal stress. You have been put through the GPI rights and responsibilities to guide you. You now have the responsibility that you owe yourself to make your life a success and to ensure a high status in life by pursuing your goal to its conclusion. Remember you have freedom to utilise GPI services - counselling and library services. Let your light continue to shine,

demonstrate a life of positive behaviour to influence others around you to do same.

What you have learned in GPI must not be in the closet. You must share it wherever you go. I wish you luck in your life and as members of GAA from today, you still carry privileges of continued support by GPI as you expand your knowledge through your activities in GAA. Consider yourself as part of the critical mass for achieving gender and social justice.

Appreciation: GPI has done so much in 9 years that our commitment alone could not have made all these possible. We are grateful to the Ford Foundation, the International Women's Health Coalition, the MacArthur Foundation, NOVIB and Equality Now for their material and financial assistance to enable us to carry out our activities from year to year without stress.

On this occasion, I would like to throw the challenge to the Nigerian government and Nigerian people in Cross River State, in particular, in the private and public sectors who stand to benefit from the products of GPI, that they should support the organisation to be sustained, if external collaborators have done so much to put us where we are today.

Now that we have demonstrated the usefulness of GPI activities to our youths, your daughters, your leaders of tomorrow we deserve to be supported and encouraged by our own society where we serve. Start today by contributing to our endowment fund and to our Youth Centre Development which will be launched next year during our 10th anniversary

celebration.

If you sell cement donate some to us; if you sell timber, donate some to us if you deal with roofing materials, donate some to us. If you sell computers, donate some for the economic skills training we give the girls, etc. Support is not only financial. You can endow our TV educational programme, radio drama, career development tour for the girls, newsletter publication, etc.

I would also like to thank our media friends who have remained faithful to our cause and supportive in reporting and spreading GPI information.

Some deserve special mention. They are Increase Abasiubong, Kunle Johnson, Rose Ojiji, Vitalis Ugoh, Jude Okwe and Vivian Edet. Of course, much credit and thanks go to the GPI family - the GPI staff. I would like you all to join me in acknowledging the relentless efforts of our staff in moulding the GPI girls to graduation. There are many other strong supporters of GPI too numerous to mention all by name.

However, the one I cannot but mention by name is our media consultant, my comrade - the only surviving one in the struggle, my partner, friend, and husband, Edwin Madunagu. Distinguished guests I thank you all for your presence even when you knew we have invited you not only to celebrate with us today but to make contributions to our sustainability through endowment fund. Thank you all for your patience and attention. ♀