

# Adolescent girls: Healthy development through empowerment

*Bene E. Madunagu, Co-ordinator, GPI Cross River & Akwa Ibom Centres, made these remarks on the occasion of the International Women's Day celebration on March 8, 2003 at the GPI, Calabar Centre*

**D**istinguished participants, GPI girls, GPI staff, members of the press, it is with much pleasure that I welcome you all to this occasion of the celebration of March 8, 2003, the International Women's Day.

The day is marked in all parts of the world to acknowledge the multifaceted, multi-sectoral contributions of women to social, economic and political development of all societies.

The origin of March 8 as the International Women's Day is traceable to a declaration made in 1910 during the anniversary of the demonstration by women in 1909, protesting oppression, exploitation and gender discrimination. March 8, every year, serves as a reminder to the society and as an inspiration to women that united, we can break the chains of gender-based violence, and the chains of inhuman, derogatory and humiliating discriminatory conditions imposed on women by patriar-

chy.

March 8, is a symbol of struggle for gender equality to ensure healthy living for everyone; women, men and children. It is a reminder to the society that women who not only hold up half of the earth in population but also reproduce and nurture the other half should remain healthy if the world must remain as a healthy place for all.

As we celebrate today, we should commit ourselves to the life-cycle approach to healthy living. This means that we should aim at meeting the health needs, especially of

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women from birth to death; from infancy through old age. We need to emphasise on the health-seeking behaviour throughout life and appropriate information and services to meet these health needs.

In paragraph 92 of the Platform for Action (PFA), the outcome document of commitments by governments during the Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) in Beijing, 1995 it is stated that "Women's right to the enjoyment of the highest standard of health must be secured throughout the whole life cycle in equality with men... Good health is essential to leading a productive and fulfilling life, and the right of all women to control all aspects of their health ... is basic to their empowerment."

Women and girls are more likely than men and boys to be poor; have minimal schooling and low social status, and be burdened with heavy work

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from an early age. As a result, women and girls tend to have special health needs, like limited access to health services, and little idea of rights and entitlements to adequate and appropriate health care services.

In our society, where male child-preference is still the norm, girls face considerable health risks, information and education about their sexuality.

There are still taboos they face and there still are considerable health risks associated with the aspects of their sexuality like management and personal hygiene during men-

struation. There are also no youth-friendly health services for them to receive preventive health care or treatment for illness. They face judgemental attitude from parents and other adults, including health care providers.

With this setting they would be forced to turn to equally ignorant peers for advice which would generally come with risks. They would end up with risky self-medication, quack services of all sorts of concoctions from chemists, and patent medicine stores and even herbalists. In addition, lack of accurate information about their

bodies and the functions of their reproductive organs, as well as lack of access to appropriate health services, would put adolescents at risk of early sexual activity, early and unwanted or unintended pregnancies, early and unsafe abortion and the consequences as well as sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS!

During the reproductive years of a woman's life - between ages 15 to 40, her risks of death and disability are high. One out of every 48 women for example, die from pregnancy-related complications. Some of these could be attributed to

poverty, leading to poor nutrition or harmful traditional practices, female genital mutilation (circumcision) and battering from the partner. It is also estimated that 56% of pregnant women would become anaemic (low blood level). And this would significantly increase their risk of dying at childbirth.

### PHOTONEWS



• Resource persons (from left), Isi Ejodamen (Oasis) Ehita Ikoghode-Aikpitanyi (Deputy Co-ordinator), Grace Osakue, GPI Co-ordinator and Kate Bello at this year's International Women's Day in Benin on March 8, 2003

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Before their reproductive years, women face the risk of poor nutrition due to gender discrimination (son-preference), they face the risk of harmful traditional practices like rape, sexual abuse and harassment, resulting in poor mental and psychological health. Both in their reproductive and post-reproductive i.e. menopausal years (45 years and older) women equally face health risks associated with ageing. Breast and cervical cancers now account for many cases of maternal mortality in Nigeria.

Adolescent girls need to be empowered to be able to reduce the myriads of social behavioural related risks and challenges being imposed on them. Empowerment is through the collective efforts to take social responsibility in promoting the rights of girls, building leadership skills among adolescent girls, giving accurate information and education through comprehensive sexuality education.

Empowerment of girls and women therefore, means that girls and women:

- will be able to make informed and autonomous decisions

about their lives

- understand that their bodies belong to them and to no other person, and hence, that they should take the responsibility of protecting their dignity, bodily integrity and personal hygiene
- learn to effectively articulate and defend their rights and their physical and emotional needs
- challenge and resist violations of their rights, coercion and discrimination
- challenge unequal power relations.

### Why is empowering girls and women important?

Empowerment of girls and women is central to their ability to exercise their rights as human beings; to claim their rights to equal opportunities and healthy living through autonomous decision-making on what affects them.

Empowerment is also important because it builds and reinforces positive self-images, self-confidence and the ability to be more effective as equal players in all spheres of human endeavour.

It makes it possible to accurately identify the needs of girls and women to allocate re-

sources, both private, in the family and public by society and government, justly and equitably. It enables girls and women to improve their nutritional status and their health. It will also help to reduce the excessive work burden of girls and women so as to afford them the opportunity to improve the effectiveness of their socio-economic output as well as have access to accurate information and services to address their special needs for reproductive activities.

Girls' and women's voices will be respected in politics and programmes affecting them if they are empowered!

Thus, March 8 should be an opportunity for promoting public education to eliminate gender discrimination and to create an enabling environment for girls and women for equal opportunities to increase their participation at all levels of development as equal partners.

I wish all girls and women, in particular, joyous, healthy and productive life with dignity, respect and gender equality.

Thank you for your presence and your attention. ♀