

GRADUATION ADDRESS

Building for our collective future

Address by GPI Coordinator, Prof Bene E. Madunagu, at the 11th graduation / public education seminar of GPI Calabar Centre, August 18, 2007

Very distinguished, guests, parents, friends and colleagues in the NGO sector, our guest speakers, our friends of the media, GPI staff from Uyo, Benin, Asaba and the host centre, Calabar and of course, the 27 celebrants of today's occasion, the 11th set of graduands at Calabar Centre, it is my singular privilege, and honour to welcome you to the 11th Graduation and Public Education Seminar of Girls' Power Initiative (GPI), Calabar Centre.

On behalf of the GPI Board of Trustees and the management of Girls' Power Initiative, I sincerely appreciate the honour you have done to us by responding positively to our call and being here with us today to celebrate with us as we send forth the 11th set of our graduates.

As indicated in our letter of invitation and on the agenda, this event is organized to serve a dual purpose: the graduation of our 2007 final year girls and the provision of information about the work of GPI with young girls as well as a public seminar through presentations by guest speakers for public education on the challenges youths, particularly the girl-children face in

our society.

I will like to draw your attention to the context that inspired my colleague, Mrs. Grace Osakue, Coordinator, GPI Benin-Centre and me, Bene Madunagu, to establish GPI, 13 years ago when we started our first weekly lessons for girls in July, 1994. GPI is homegrown. It was founded by two Nigerian women. It addresses the specific needs of Nigerian girls taking into account the opportunities, threats, culture, strengths and challenges of the communities that the girls live and grow in.

The contents of the curriculum are developed by Nigerians in consultation with the girls and in partnership with the state

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government, using the national curriculum on these issues.

GPI as the name implies, is a Girls-Only Organization: A girls-only space responds to the need for safety, confidentiality and the privacy girls need for physical and emotional development.

GPI is a space for leadership building for girls. GPI trains and builds the skills of girls to be forward-looking and motivates them with information through effective girl-centred programmes for leadership development. GPI programmes are holistic, taking into account all aspects that address the total health, leadership, educational development and well-being of girls as change agents and leaders, GPI provides counselling, crisis intervention, etc, to girls.

It also collaborates and relates and builds connections with parents, communities, other developmental organizations and relevant government institutions as well as a variety of organizations in specialized services such as legal, health, media to enhance our programme effectiveness and avoid duplication of services.

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more girls graduates 11th batch

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Background / context of GPI's work

Approximately, 28 million adolescents, that is more than 20% of Nigeria's population of 144 million (by the 2005 census) are between the ages of 10-19 years. Majority of these adolescents grow up ignorant of issues of sexuality and gender. These two issues constitute the totality of the life of every individual, male or female.

Coupled with this are other similar contexts that negatively impact on young people. Conservative harmful traditions and patriarchy continue to expose young girls in particular, to exploitation and abuse. They are further put at risk by increasing family poverty resulting from market and profit-oriented economic growth policies that pay no attention to human welfare. There is also the growing pursuit of primitive wealth accumulation that deprives growing children of the time they need from parents for proper guidance in this stage of human development. At the same time, the current globalization policies have forced different cultural influences that

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create serious confusing messages about life for young people.

There are also negative media influences, increased access and exposure of young people to pornography, forcing young girls into making uninformed choices that expose them to risky repercussions. Human trafficking of young girls in particular, for sexual exploitation, forced prostitution and slave labour has become a daily media report.

Family poverty exposes young girls to transactional sex with the attendant health hazards of HIV/AIDS, unintended and unwanted pregnancies as well as the increasing mortality from unsafe abortion. These continue to dehumanize most underprivileged girls and women, reinforcing for them and their off-springs, the cycle of ignorance, poverty, disempowerment, poor health and death in the midst of trillions and billions being squandered by our leaders.

Research data have shown that about 72% of all deaths among girls under 19 years, and 50% of Nigeria's high maternal mortality rates result from early and unintended pregnancy and unsafe abortion. Teenage pregnancy, unsafe abortion, HIV/AIDS, harmful traditional practices like Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), son-preference, food taboos, widowhood rites, bride price, wife inheritance, etc, and contemporary harmful practices like human trafficking, pose

serious health and social challenges, weighted against adolescent girls and women. More than 150 out of every, 1,000 girls give birth before the age of 19, especially in our rural communities.

The rate of school dropouts due to poverty, teenage pregnancy, HIV/AIDS and trafficking among adolescent girls continues to increase. Gender prejudices, discriminatory norms and practices and stereotyping discourage, limit, underplay and trivialize women's economic, social and political contribution, thus discouraging young girls from setting goals to achieve high status in society. Political aspirations are being portrayed in such dimensions that they are unattractive to girls and women.

Increasing cost of human reproduction has equally put so much stress on people and which in turn, has generated different forms of violence with girls and women as the victims of such violence.

These few examples constitute the context and background that inspired the establishment of GPI. The challenges informed the motto of GPI "Towards an empowered Womanhood."

Having answered the question that is often on most minds, "why GPI", I will go ahead to answer the next question: "What is GPI all about,?" by stating our mission, vision and values and then in a summary, what we do to produce GPI graduates, today being the graduation of the 11th set since

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inception.

The mission of GPI is to empower adolescent girls with accurate information on their sexuality, human rights; life management and leadership skills from a gender perspective for social action.

Our vision of GPI is to be a leading sustainable feminist institution with critical consciousness and capacity for analysis on social and gender prejudices; committed to empowering girls into healthy, self-reliant and productive women for the achievement of positive changes and transformation of patriarchal values in Nigeria.

Our values lie in the GPI family as a team, working with passion and commitment, upholding feminist ideology with integrity and responsiveness, while providing equal opportunity for all.

What GPI does is that it currently has four centres in four states of the South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria, namely Cross River, Akwa Ibom, Edo and Delta states, with office in Calabar, Uyo, Benin-City and Asaba. From these four locations we have national impact through coalitions, networks, publications and the media, as well as reaching out to other parts of Africa through our internship and training programmes and internationally through our publications.

Two organizations in Cameroun have modelled their institutional operations, based on GPI's curriculum. A third organization has just visited GPI and was given our publications, including three volumes of our training manuals and

curriculum to adapt for their organization.

Our activities in GPI are geared towards breaking the sexist prejudices against girls and women to assist girls to develop critical consciousness, overcome gender prejudices and to stand up for their rights and to develop their talents, confidence in themselves to reach out and to be able to compete on equal terms with their male counterparts as empowered women. Our strategies are designed to enable girls to recognize and challenge gender prejudices which are embedded in social expectations, expressions, norms, practices as well as in language, culture, songs, lyrics, ballads, social values and all aspects of life into which they are socialized.

GPI activities are, therefore, intricate and comprehensive. Our major strategies are:

- Education for girls and for the public
- Counselling and library services
- Research and documentation
- Networking
- Advocacy and policy work
- Technical resource training.

In the case of girls education, we offer a three-year long weekly participatory discussions and lessons for girls, aged 10-18 years to help them think critically, set their goals, map out a vision for their future, challenge discrimination and injustice in their lives, support one another during their period in GPI and after graduation in their association, (GAA) in rejecting gender inequality. The training and skills they receive are geared towards

their preparing themselves as the new generation of Nigerian feminist activists and leaders in the Nigerian women's movement.

Our curriculum which adopts a rights-based approach and from a gender perspective has been rated as the most innovative in the field by an expert who is conducting a global review of such materials for the Population Council. And GPI was given a global award in March, 2007.

The World Association for Sexual Health (WAS) also gave the 2007 "WAS Award for Excellence and Innovation in Sexuality Education" to Girls' Power Initiative, "based on the criteria of innovation, relevance to their social context, boldness, courage in facing adverse conditions and materials and methods used." The award was conferred and presented at the opening ceremony of the XVIII (18th) World Congress of the World Association for Sexology, (WAS) in Sydney, Australia, April 15-19, 2007.

About the graduands

The GPI graduands before you today are confident, composed, respectful, respected, resourceful, informed, empowered and educated girls. Girls come into GPI with myths, misconceptions and stereotypes from socialization, believing that the vision of all women is to be married, give birth to children, be good housekeeper, care-givers; to be seen, adored and battered by those who claim to love them, but not speak out so as not to "wash dirty lines in the public;" never aspiring to be leaders, etc.

But as exemplified by the 36 girls we are graduating today, they have learnt to appreciate the need to speak out for their rights; take actions that would change the oppressive

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conditions, which they were socialized to believe, was "the portion for females." They have learned to comport themselves to be respected; and given opportunities to express their opinion on issues that affect them and enlightened about the challenges they face as girls from social and peer pressure and above all, have the knowledge and skills to aspire, set vision beyond stereotype to achieve what they have chosen as their future profession or career.

They have developed the capacity to speak out confidently. They are to encourage and support their peers to change risky behaviour. They have learnt to adopt positive behaviour and attitude and have learned to resist negative peer pressure. They have learned to take initiative and take the responsibility and leadership to do what they see as necessary and important without waiting to be told.

On behalf of the management and staff of GPI, I sincerely congratulate you for the successful completion of your 3-year programme in GPI. As it has been with the 10 sets before you, some of whom are today youth facilitators in GPI, "many are called, but few are chosen." You were more than 50 when you started three years ago, but 27 of you chose to remain to the end. It is my hope that this choice you made will remain one of the strongest weapons for your life success.

The GPI girls that graduated before you, have demonstrated in their post-GPI lives, the positive influence GPI has had in their lives. In our 13 years of activities, we have not yet recorded any case of any girl who remained to complete the three years in GPI, that

has been a drop-out, or a failure. It is on this note that I want to thank all parents, guardians and indeed, GPI facilitators who, by their support, contributions and trust, have made it possible for us to celebrate today as we have done about this time of the year, for the last 10 years.

It is my strong belief that having persisted to see today as a GPI graduate and with the continuous support and guidance of your parents and guardians, as well as the GPI Alumnae Association (GAA) in which you will be enrolled from today after we have certified you as graduates of GPI, that you would uphold the values, principles, knowledge and skills that you have acquired in the three years, to continue to stand out among your peers as responsible and fulfilled young women.

There are many witnesses today who will point you out as a GPI graduate. Hence, you will face extra challenges and tests to prove this noble recognition. It is, therefore, your duty, with GAA and GPI, your alma mater, behind you, as your support, to demonstrate your skills and knowledge to protect and defend your rights, boldly, sharply, assertively, but very politely. Never must you be ever seen to be passive or aggressive. But you must always remember to assert your rights and protect your bodily integrity.

Remember that while you will no longer be attending weekly lessons in GPI, you still retain the privilege of continuous use of the

GPI counselling and library services. You will always have the privilege through GAA to share experiences and information in the GPI weekly TV programme, "The Girl Child." You are also welcome to send in articles to the quarterly GPI newsletter.

Last, but not the least note of advice, remember that neither the three years of lessons you attended, nor the certificate you will receive today as having participated in the programme for three years, will rise up to face life challenges for you. It is your adherence to the values inculcated in you, as a good ambassador of GPI to justify the trust your parents and guardians showered on you to remain in GPI till graduation and being a role model to the younger girls in any community you find yourself, such as the university environment, or while serving your NYSC year, at your place of work, in your religious institution, etc, that will make you stand out as the shining star, the precious one, the silver, the bosom, the pearl, the alpha, and the seed of women empowerment, gender equality and

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social justice to be respected. I wish you all very successful, exciting, bright and fulfilled future.

Distinguished participants, as I once again welcome you in these few sentences, permit me to recognize some very special contributors in our midst today who have played remarkable roles that have contributed to our continuous yearly gathering like this. Let me start with apologies to those whose names may be unavoidably left out by error because the list is too long.

May I recognize our Board Chair, Prof. Eka I. Braide, Vice-Chancellor, Cross River State University of Technology, the

graduands on whose behalf we gather here today; the parents and guardians here present, or their representatives; all GPI staff, programme staff and support staff, as well as our ever supportive NGO friends, our media friends: Increase, Kunle, Jude, Musa; our Chief Producer of GPI TV programme, Mrs. Rose Ojiji of CRBC TV; the Executive Director of our referral clinic, Dr. Gloria Archibong; our colleagues in the Network to Curb Sexual Abuse in the state, (NETCUSA); the Cross River State government, particularly the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, Ministry of

Women Affairs, and the management of CRBC for all their support.

We are delighted to have the support of all of you.

Finally, beside every success there is always an understanding, patient, and supportive partner who shares the same vision. I find these and other similar positive qualities from which I derive the strength to carry on, in my friend, partner, comrade and husband, Edwin Madunagu in our 33 years of partnership. My children Unoma and Ikenna have remained very strong indicators and catalyst for my work in GPI as I learn from them daily to understand what challenges adolescents face in life. I thank you all for your patience and presence. ♀