

GRADUATION ADDRESS**Challenging gender prejudices**

Address by the Coordinator, GPI Calabar, Bene E. Madunagu, on the 13th graduation/public seminar, held on Saturday, August 29, 2009

Very esteemed and distinguished guests,

I am delighted and honoured to welcome you all, our special guests, the chairperson of the GPI Board of Trustees, other board members here present, our distinguished supporters, our partners and collaborators, parents, friends, our colleagues in the NGO sector, our media friends, GPI staff from Benin, Asaba, Uyo and Calabar Centres; members of the GPI Alumnae Association, and most especially the celebrators of today's occasion, the 2009 GPI graduating peer educators.

It is my pleasure to welcome you all to the 13th graduation and public seminar of GPI Calabar Centre on behalf of GPI Board of Trustees and management of Girls' Power Initiative. I appreciate your unflinching support for the work we do with our girls and for honouring our invitation to be present at this occasion which also marks our 15th year of regular weekly interactive educational sessions with adolescent girls.

GPI organizes this event every year to serve a dual purpose; the first being the graduation of peer educators in the final year of their three-year training on all aspects of human sexuality. The second purpose is our annual public seminar to provide information on

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GPI's work with adolescent girls and create awareness on issues related to the challenges they face in their growing-up years as well as encourage a collective community and each and every participant to engage in the promotion of healthy transitions for adolescents, particularly adolescent girls in our society.

My brief welcome address will address three areas to help you better understand GPI and the work we do with the adolescent girls like the ones seated here before you.

1. Why GPI? What does GPI do? What has been our experience working with adolescent girls in the last 15 years?
2. Some milestones in our 15 years of activism
3. A note to the 13th set graduands.

Why GPI and what does GPI do?

Girls' Power Initiative (GPI) was founded in 1993 by two Nigerian women, Bene Madunagu and Grace Osakue. GPI was created to address the specific needs of adolescent girls, aged 10-18 years. We recognized that girls are resourceful, talented, creative and intelligent persons who possess inherent abilities that can spur them to take initiatives and contribute immensely to social development. However, girls and women through the pervasive patriarchal socialization process have been denied opportunities to express these strengths to their benefits, and that of their families, communities and country at large. Girls grow up facing challenges created and perpetuated by society to the detriment of their health; they face discriminatory norms and practices

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like Female Genital Mutilation, son preference, trafficking, forced prostitution, sexual abuse, including rape, incest, different forms of violence, denial of equal opportunities with their male peers, virginity tests, poor education if any, early marriage and pregnancy before the age of 18 with all the attendant risks. They are also inflicted with unintended pregnancies which in many cases may result in unsafe abortion with permanent disability or death. This is why GPI as the name implies is girls-only organization to address these challenges.

Since our inception in 1993, GPI has been working towards empowering adolescents, especially girls between the ages of 10-18 on issues of human rights, Sexual and Reproductive Health and Right (SRHR), life management skills and gender equality. Our work with these girls exposed us to the extent to which deep rooted sexist and patriarchal norms of the society have negatively influenced their attitudes and behaviours thereby making them victims of harmful cultural practices, ignorant and vulnerable to exploitation and sexual abuse.

GPI's success in providing adequate

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sexuality education to adolescents have helped them to make informed decisions on issues of sexuality thereby reducing risky behaviours and the spread of HIV/AIDS. Girls are encouraged to take on leadership positions, recognize/resist/intervene on cases of harmful practices and there is reduction in teenage pregnancy, unsafe abortion and school drop outs. The girls themselves are able to challenge societal misconceptions and breakaway from stereotyped roles by choosing to pursue male dominated careers. Currently, GPI is located in four states: Cross River, Edo, Delta and Akwa Ibom.

With about 15 million Nigerian girls facing these kinds of risks to their health and meaningful living, GPI was created to:

- Assist girls to reclaim their positive natural endowments that would help them to struggle against these barriers imposed on them by society.
- Provide a safe space for their safety where they can also experience the confidentiality and privacy that they need and to share with their peers for physical, psychological and emotional stability to grow into empowered and fulfilled citizens
- Build their skills and motivate them with accurate

information for leadership development through effective girl-centred programmes. Our comprehensive curriculum addresses all aspects of health, leadership, functional educational development and general well-being of the beneficiaries as change agents and leaders, for a transformed Nigerian society.

- Reverse the unfortunate data of about 72% of all deaths among girls, aged less than 19 years and over 50% of Nigeria's high maternal mortality rates being the result of unsafe abortion. Over 80% of unsafe abortions results from unwanted

pregnancy, the outcome of sexual abuse/rape.

- Build connections with parents, communities, other development organizations and relevant government institutions as well as a variety of organizations in specialized services such as legal, health, media to enhance effectiveness and avoid duplication of services.

Our mission is to empower adolescent girls with accurate information on their total development as human beings; in other words, their sexuality; their rights, entitlements as human beings as well as on life management and leadership skills from a gender perspective, for social transformative actions.

Our vision is to be a leading sustainable feminist institution with critical consciousness and capacity for analysis of 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.

GPI activities: our activities are geared towards breaking the sexist prejudices against girls and women to help them develop critical consciousness, and to stand up for their rights, develop their talents, confidence in themselves to reach out and to be able to compete with their

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peers both males and females as empowered and resourceful women. Our strategies are designed to enable girls to recognize and challenge gender prejudices which are embedded in social expectations, expressions, norms, practices.

Some of these strategies include:

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

Our curriculum which adopts a rights-based approach and from a gender perspective won a global award in March 2007 as being the most innovative in the field by an expert who conducted a global review for the Population Council. GPI also won the "2007 award for Excellence and Innovation in Sexuality Education," by the World Association for Sexual Health (WAS), in April 2007, based on the criteria of innovation, relevance to their social context, boldness, courage in facing adverse conditions and material/methods used.

Recent accomplishments of GPI

GPI started regular lessons for adolescent girls, aged 10-18 years, in July 1994 with 9 girls in Calabar, Cross

GPI also carries out outreach activities in secondary schools, in the four centres through the holiday programme, youth talents festival, boys/girls forum, interschool debates and drama competitions.

River state and 6 girls in Benin-City, Edo State. Today, at our 13th graduation ceremony, we will be graduating 36 girls who will join more than 900 graduates (426 in Calabar

alone) of GPI from the four centres where we currently operate-Calabar in Cross River state (which also hosts the national secretariat), Uyo in Akwa Ibom State, Asaba in Delta State and Benin in Edo State. GPI also carries out outreach activities in secondary schools, in the four centres through the holiday programme, youth talents festival, boys/girls forum, interschool debates and drama competitions. These programmes reach more than 50,000 adolescent boys and girls.

The GPI on Air (a weekly television education programme, aired on the CRBC, Calabar provide public education on issues of sexuality and reproductive health and rights of adolescents.

In our 15 years, we have not missed a single edition of our newsletter, *The Girls' Power*. This is distributed widely, both nationally and internationally, and have a continuously increasing lists of readers who share how beneficial the information contained in the newsletter is to them.

We have gained much goodwill with the government and people of Cross River State. This has resulted in our very strong partnership with the state's Ministry of Education. One outcome has been our success in training and retraining teachers in 131 public schools in Cross River State for the implementation of the National Curriculum on Family Life and HIV/AIDS Education programme, rooted in the comprehensive sexuality education which has been the focus of GPI since inception.

These in-school programmes, in partnership with the government, have reached more than 35,000 students of junior secondary 1 to 3. Last year, 150 teachers across the

state were trained for the Learning about Living programme, the electronic version of Family Life and HIV/AIDS education curriculum. We have developed 6 volumes of sexuality education series for young people in addition to the 3 volumes of revised edition of GPI training manual to meet the age-specific needs and experiences of adolescents aged between 10 and 18 years. GPI also provided technical assistance to the Cross River state government Universal Basic Education Board (SUBEB) for the training of teachers on SFLHE for lower and upper primary schools.

Through our internship programme, other organizations have visited and spent time with GPI in Calabar to understand our sexuality education programme and have gone on to implement same in their organizations. We have had organizations from different states in Nigeria and from other countries like Cameroon, Kenya, Tanzania and the United States of America. Five interns from Kenya just finished their internship with us on August 5, 2009. GPI conducted several researches and community interventions in more than 25 rural communities in Calabar. There is an on-going research on sexual abuse being conducted in 6 communities in Calabar Municipality, Calabar South and Odukpani Local Government Areas in Cross River State.

A note to the 13th set of graduands Ladies and gentlemen, I present before
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you today 36 peer educators, empowered young women who would be passing out today as GPI graduates and members of the GPI Alumnae Association (GAA).

The GPI graduands before you today are articulate, assertive, bold, confident, distinguished, empowered, educated, fulfilled, gracious, helpful, informed, judicious, knowledgeable, leaders, motivated, respectful, resourceful, informed, in-charge, and effective change agents. They came in three years ago loaded with myths, misconceptions and stereotypes from socialization, believing that the vision of all women was to be married, give birth to children, be good house-keepers, 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 linens 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 conditions that they were socialized to believe was the status of females;
- Learned to comport themselves to earn respect;
- Learned skills to aspire, set vision beyond stereotype to achieve what they have chosen as their future profession/career.
- They have learned to adopt positive behaviour and attitude and have learned to resist negative peer pressure.

They have learned to take initiative and take 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 all for the successful completion of your 3-year programme in GPI. Some of

the GPI girls that graduated before you have today, become facilitators in GPI, some have their families and are leaders in their different fields, working in different parts of the world and have demonstrated in their post-GPI lives, the positive influence GPI has had in their lives. In our 15 years, GPI has not recorded any case of a GPI girl who remained to complete the 3 years of GPI, that has been a drop-out or a failure. It is on this note that we thank all parents and guardians, as well as the GPI Alumnae Association (GAA) for their contributions in the success that we celebrate today.

I believe that you have set your goals and that your aspiration as you leave GPI as regular lesson attendee, is to go beyond the socially expected stereotype of what a woman should be, by showing excellence in your future chosen careers. As you go into the larger society, remember you will meet challenges in trying to uphold the values, skills, knowledge and principles you have acquired in the 3 years. When you face such, don't forget that GPI, your alma mater and GAA are on hand to provide the support you need.

Always remember you have been a shining star, a precious gem, you have been silver, bosom, pearl, the alpha and the seeders and damsels, moving towards an empowered womanhood, gender equality and social justice. You are always welcome to the center at any time to use our services like the counselling services. You are also welcome to send in articles to the quarterly newsletter.

Finally, distinguished ladies and gentlemen, I cannot end this very short address without recognizing and appreciating the key roles played in the success story of GPI, I will request you to allow me mention just a few among all of

you.

- I recognize GPI graduates, past and present and their parents
- GPI programme and support staff, past and present, for the family and team spirit which they have built to collectively mould the peer educators over these past 15 years. They are all exemplary in their commitment and almost voluntary service.
- Our ever supportive NGO friends; school teachers and administrators
- Our board chairpersons, the immediate past and the present one
- Executive Director of our referral clinic, Dr. Gloria Archibong
- Partners in the Network to Curb Sexual Abuse (NETCUSA)
- The producer of the GPI on Air programme and the management of CRBC
- The Cross River State ministries of education, justice, women affairs, youths, and health and the Cross River State government.

I appreciate the strong financial and technical support as well as the trust we have received from the International Women's Health Coalition (IWHC), Ford Foundation, the MacArthur Foundation, the African Women's Development Fund (AWDF), Oxfam NOVIB and Empower. Their support has sustained us and allowed us to venture into areas we did not even imagine when we started.

I am deeply grateful to my friend, partner, comrade and husband, Edwin Madunagu for his support, love, care, understanding, trust and his immense contributions to the success story of GPI. I have enjoyed and continue to enjoy his true partnership since 1973 when we first met as graduate students. I thank you all for your presence, the honour you have given us for being here and the patience to survive my "VERY BRIEF" welcome address which is long enough to show you how pleased I am to have your presence. ♀