

# Educating adolescent girls towards an empowered womanhood

By

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**G**irls' power Initiative (GPI) Nigeria is a non-governmental, non-profit making, non-exploitative and non-partisan organisation seeking to equip girls for development and participation in Nation-building and consequently for a healthy womanhood. GPI seeks to empower girls, especially those between ages 10 - 18 and to promote their sexual and reproductive health and rights.

The word "Initiative" in the Oxford Advance Learner's dictionary 5th Edition is defined as "the power or opportunity to act or take charge before other people do; the capacity and imagination to realize what needs to be done, together with the courage and willingness to do it especially without others' help"

Doing something on ones initiative means without anyone telling her to do it. The term initiative in the name of our organization strictly conforms to this dictionary meaning.

GPI is located at two centres namely Benin-city, Edo State as the South West centre and Calabar, Cross River State as the South East centre. My colleague, who coordinates GPI south West and I started GPI in 1993 at the planning stage of writing our constitution, consultations with women activists in Nigeria to set up the Board of Trustees and generally planning for the organisation to take off. We recruited the first 2 facilitators and girls for the organisation about the middle of 1994. The first two facilitators were trained on the

job in the process of conducting regular lessons for the first set of girls.

In the first two years of working with the girls, we developed topics that the girls identified as areas of concerns for adolescent girls. We now have a standard curriculum of topics about leadership skills, personal empowerment, sexuality, sexual and reproductive health and rights.

All GPI activities are conducted during the day and in public/open venue. For example, we used the African Club for 2 consecutive years for our Christmas activities where parents, guardians, teachers and the general public were invited in writing and through radio announcements.

The Christmas activities of 1997 were held at the National Museum, Calabar with over 600 participants in attendance, where 4 male adolescents from the programme "Conscientising Nigerian male Adolescents - CMA" here in Calabar presented papers on various aspects of violence against girls and women.

GPI produces regular quarterly Newsletter (the GP) where girls are encouraged to write about their life experiences and lessons from GPI in order to educate their peers who have not had the opportunity to belong directly to GPI.

In July 1997, and August 1997, GPI South East and South West respectively graduated their first set of girls after 3 years of Training in public ceremonies involving parents and the press. Those girls are now going about their own business and are doing well in furthering their education.

We conduct skill training in various skills to empower the girls economically because we realise that many girls get sexually exploited for financial gains to meet their needs. We organise excursions to various career setting to encourage the girls to choose other empowering careers beyond social stereotype professions for females.

We recruit and train facilitators to cope with the expanding number of girls needing GPI information. We conduct outreach programmes to schools to reach out to girls who are unable to attend the lessons at the centre. We have outreach programmes presently at Community Technical College, Ikot Effanga, Unique Sec. Commercial School, Ikot Omin, Nico Sec. Commercial School and National Comprehensive Secondary School, Anantigha. We are in the process of extending the outreach programme to other schools who wish us to do so.

Presently our centre can no longer contain us and we are utilizing five classrooms at Atu primary School in addition to our centre. Both our staff and girls come from different backgrounds with differences in culture religion and belief systems and there is no discrimination during staff recruitment or registration of girls.

During the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in September 1994 in Cairo, the more than 184 countries including Nigeria accepted the fact that girls have less access to education, health and nutrition than boys, thus limiting their opportunities for full participation in public and private life. It was also agreed that from an early age, women are less empowered than men to manage their sexual and reproductive lives. Their unequal status limits their ability to protect themselves in adolescence and adult life from sexually transmitted

*(Continue on Page 12)*



*GPI South East girls in a drama session at the parent teachers and guardians forum (PTF) held recently in Calabar.*

## ... Towards empowered womanhood

(Continued from Page 9)

diseases including HIV/AIDS; unwanted pregnancy, and coercive sexual relations.

In addition it was observed that as a result of discriminatory attitudes and cultural traditions, girls are subjected to harmful practices, such as female genital mutilation (so called female circumcision) which have serious consequences for the health and well-being of girls and women.

Based on these observations the countries of the UN in commitments at the ICPD, again during the World summit on social development (1995 in Copenhagen) and again at the Fourth World Conference for Women (FWCW) Beijing 1995 to address these issues. Some of the provisions in these documents include "support non-governmental organisations, community-based and religious organisations in their efforts to promote changes in negative attitudes and practices towards girls". "Protect and promote the rights of adolescents to sexual and reproductive health information and services, and reduce the number of adolescent pregnancies"; Eliminate discrimination against the girl child through education programmes and media campaigns that raise public awareness on gender sensitivity, the value of the girl-child, the importance of education for girls, and the need to eliminate son preference. Involve parents in eliminating discriminatory attitudes and encourage them to treat girls and boys equally in the family".

It is a documented fact that: 500,000 women die every year, one every minute, from pregnancy-related causes. 99% of these are in the developing countries. 20 million unsafe abortions occur every year resulting in tens of thousands of deaths and millions of disabilities. More than 15 million girls aged 15 to 19 give births every year. Over 300 million new cases of sexually transmitted diseases occur every year, affecting one of every 20 adolescents.

In our culture, the common practice is to protect adolescents from receiving information and education on sexuality, sexual and reproductive health matters in the false belief that ignorance will encourage chastity and virginity. However, the reality today is different. Children are exposed to incomplete and inaccurate messages on TV, in magazines, on bill boards, in schools with their peers and other sources not under the

control of parents, guardians or teachers. The most visible results of this is the high rate of unwanted pregnancies and deaths through unsafe abortions.

The outcome of a research in Nigeria showed that no one formally teaches young people about sex. They got such information from news magazines, films, biology classes and from events in the environment where they live including their homes. In the research it was found that 24 to 46% of the adolescents were already sexually active 22% of these young girls revealed that their first experience of sex was through rape.

While denying information to adolescents about sexuality, boys and girls mix freely at school during the stage when their sexual drive is high biologically. This is why in a study 2 out of every 5 secondary school girls have had at least one previous pregnancy and over 60% of patients presenting at Nigeria hospitals with abortion complications accounts for 72% of all deaths among young girls under the age of 19 years. Furthermore 50% of the deaths in Nigeria's high maternal mortality rate are adolescent girls are due to unsafe abortion. Reports show that 17% of Nigerian adolescent girls have had sex by age 15 and 63% by age 19. These are but a few of the background problems that caused my colleague in Benin and I do conceptualise and create GPI.

We falsely believe that we as parents, guardians and teachers are protecting our girls when we restrict their movements. But we turn around and send them to fetch water from distant bore holes where the owner has generator. We send them to markets. We allow them to go to church alone. Most of them go to schools some few kilometers from home everyday. Yet, we think we are protecting them by violating their rights to information about the reality of their lives.

GPI has chosen to face reality by teaching the girls in our care effective communication skills to defend their rights. They know that they have the right to say no and they learn from us the effective ways to do so. They have learnt that neither friendship nor love has anything to be equated with sex. It is when they then assert their rights and insist on being respected as human beings and not the way society believes they should be, that they get accused of being aggressive, or insulting

It is a very sad social commentary for a

question like this to be raised rather than "How can we encourage a program such as GPI and CMA to continue to provide humanistic services to the benefit of the public". I know that when I finish, the first question that many here present would ask is How GPI gets funded. Let me therefore spare you the embarrassment of such question that deserves no answer. I say so because there are hundreds of Nigerians that are able to raise funds worth 500 times what GPI has in all its period of existence but would rather use same to marry more wives, build more houses, buy more gold, go abroad for holidays or such personal selfish endeavours. It is difficult therefore for most Nigerians to accept that anyone could provide quality education to serve humanity freely where everything including chicken faeces is sold for money. It is my belief that knowledge like air and water should be free and whenever I am in a position where I can use my intellectual capacity to offer knowledge freely, I will do so. Let me say here that from April 1993 when my colleague and I conceived of GPI until November 1994, we had a plan to bring together girls from Benin and Calabar to share experiences and come up with what are their major concerns that my colleague and I received assistance again to execute some of the activities the girls came up with. We look forward to when millionaire Nigerians will appreciate the role of GPI and come to our support.

I will conclude by re-iterating that young people are very impressionable and very inquisitive and when we as parents, teachers and guardians deny them information, they then refuse to confide in us and turn to their peers and other sources where they receive wrong messages. Girls who have remained consistent in our programme have enough information and communication skills which empower them to make correct choices about their health and right.

Indeed it is non-GPI girls that are brought by their friends who are in GPI, for counselling. Girls learn about various forms of relationships to prevent being deceived. They learn about the dangers of drug abuse as well as tips to avoid being raped. We understand that as human beings girls have ideas and opinions on issues and we listen to them. If you take this position the girls will be encourage to be close to you. We train them and expose them to various careers through excursions but we do so with full and express/written permission of the parents and the purpose of the excursions are usually fully stated. I will stop here and I would like to thank you all for your patience and attention ♀