

Expanding training opportunities for adolescent girls

Paper presented by Dr. Bene Madunagu, Coordinator, GPI South East Zone at the fourth graduation and public education event of Girl's Power Initiative (GPI) South East Zone at Marian Hotel, Calabar, on Saturday, July 29, 2000

The agreements adopted by consensus at the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo and at the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) in Beijing along with the further actions on both during their five-year reviews in June 1999 and June 2000, respectively, created a very positive agenda of actions for expanding health, educational and training opportunities for adolescent girls, in particular, for the future.

The present presentation at this occasion of the Fourth Graduation Ceremony of Girls' Power Initiative (GPI), South East Zone, is an attempt to draw attention of parents, guardians, teachers and the Nigerian public at large, through the media here present to the provisions in these documents and how these can be applied to advance the progress of our daughters. This occasion is an appropriate forum for me to do this since, GPI is today demonstrating in practice, by this graduation ceremony, that the provisions in these documents are appropriate and relevant for the healthy growth and development of Nigerian girls and the Nigerian nation. Beyond this, we also believe that they can be implemented.

It is our conviction that society stands to benefit by:

- a) Expanding educational and training opportunities for girls in particular;
- b) Implementing adolescent-friendly sexual and reproductive health education and services for girls in particular and youths in general;
- c) Consciously and in all sectors of society, closing the gender gap to create

the basis for gender equality and equity.
d) Creating, reviewing and enforcing laws that protect the rights of girls in particular and all our children in general.

All these strategies are contained not only in the 4 consensus documents I mentioned earlier but also in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, (CRC), a document that the Nigerian government ratified in 1991 and which

thus became domesticated within the context of our legal system. The National Policy on the Adolescent Reproductive Health in Nigerian adopted in 1998 and the framework for its implementation adopted in January 1999 endorse these strategies.

Expanding Education And Training Opportunities

Education is a human right and the only guaranteed path to healthy life and enhanced status for individuals to contribute maximally to their communities in the struggle for sustained socio-economic and political development. For education to be useful to individuals and to society, it must be non discriminatory, it must contain curricular that are designed to meet the needs of the community as a whole as well as its individual members and lead to increasing gender

equality and equity. Such education must acknowledge individual differences in terms of talents and peculiarities as well as widen the scope of opportunities for girls. It must be available to all children equally and be capable of creating a sound all-round preparation for full and effective participation in

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society. Computer and other modern technologies should be compulsory skills at primary and secondary levels of formal education and should be free as mandated by the CRC.

Special attention should be paid to remove the numerous sexist barriers to girls' education. Sharing of household chores by all members of the household, male and female, will go a long way to release the girl-child from heavy household workload that she is assigned only because she is a female. This will give her equal educational opportunity with her brothers by giving her more time and energy. There are many examples in all of our societies to show that where a female is given an opportunity to learn the course of her choice, she has not been found wanting. Indeed in all professions formerly regarded as male domains, women now excel. Thus girls should never again be restricted to sexist attitudes that devalue girls' education or that treats it differently from boys' education. Restricting or preventing pregnant girls from continuing their education while the males responsible for the pregnancy goes unpunished, should be abolished.

In GPI, girls are made to know that they are human beings and therefore can excel in any profession of their choice since it is not the sexual and reproductive organs that differentiate female from male that are used in studying any subject. Being so debriefed and with excursions organised by GPI for the girls to different institutions to learn about different professions and the subjects required for such careers, our girls have been found to improve in their school work and aspire beyond familiar sexist job stereotypes. One area that girl's education gets stalled is in sexual exploitation especially with increasing poverty. GPI found that counseling girls

to beware of the intrigues of so called "sugar daddies and sweet-tongued boys" is not enough. Hence adding skills training in simple products for them to use their part time to do something with their hands with little capital is a useful way for girls to earn their money to meet their needs. Our, educational systems must be reviewed, strengthened and expanded to include appropriate technologies and skills to enable children to be self-reliant to enhance their ability to remain in school and become fulfilled professionals. Schools must also be made free from gender-base violence such as sexual abuse, rape and exploitation of girls by teachers. This is an essential condition to encourage girls to remain in school. Providing free training and transport for girls to attend GPI lessons and activities has been an important way to ensure non-discrimination.

(b) Implementing Adolescent-Friendly Sexual and Reproductive health and Services

Health, just like education, is a human right that must be enjoyed by all without discrimination on the basis of sex, class or ethnicity. The International Conference on Population and Development, Programme of Action (ICPD, POA), various international agreements and the Nigerian Policy on Adolescent Reproductive health, have called for action to improve the reproductive and sexual health of adolescents and to provide access to age-appropriate, gender-sensitive information and services. By adolescent sexual and reproductive health, I mean the physical and emotional/psychological well-being of adolescents and their ability to remain free from unwanted pregnancy, unsafe abortion, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) including HIV/AIDS and all forms of sexual violence and coercion.

Young people have the right to information and services, appropriate to their age and needs, to assist them in their growing up and to protect them from diseases, abuse and exploitation when they start their sexual and reproductive lives. It is clear that, generally, early sexual activity, unintended pregnancies and early childbirth occur because of ignorance about sexuality, reproduction, contraception, misinformation or lack of information. Adverse effects on young people in the context of their sexual and reproductive health can also be traced to social prejudices and practices and hence to the link between reproductive health, gender inequality and unequal power relationships between males and females.

The dependency and submissiveness of young women are mostly related to their sexual decisions as society creates the impression that females have no role or say in decision about sex and reproduction and that such decision are therefore the prerogative of men. Yet, at the same time, the burden of contraception, child bearing and rearing are borne typically and almost exclusively by women. Added to this is the fact that health workers are usually hostile to unmarried young women, victims of sexual exploitation and abuse and have no regard to the privacy, confidentiality and informed consent of such clients.

Since adolescent sexual and reproductive health is determined by social, cultural and economic factors, it is important that policy-makers, health care providers, parents and guardians provide young people with accurate information, counseling and good quality of health services to help them develop into healthy adults.

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c) Closing Gender Gap

Gender refers to the socially defined roles and responsibilities of men and women, boys and girls. Gender equality means equal treatment of women and men in laws and policies and in access to resources and services within families, communities and society at large. Gender equity means fairness and justice in the distribution of benefits and responsibilities between women and men, and often requires women-specific projects and programme to end existing inequalities.

The ICPD Programme of Action, argues in its chapter 4 that "since in all societies discrimination on the basis of sex often starts at the earliest stages of life, greater equality for the girl child is a necessary first-step in ensuring that women realise their full potential and become equal partners in development".

In our societies, at home, at school, at work, indeed in all facets of life, customs, expectations and attitudes differ for girls and boys. While girls are generally restricted and are allowed limited opportunities, boys are free and have all the opportunities to explore and develop their talents and potentials from an early age. Gender discrimination is present at all levels of social interaction, at home, in school, at work, everywhere even in religious institutions where only males become high spiritual leaders, writers and interpreters of religious texts to the detriment of females. Higher expectation in school work is placed for boys while girls are not expected to do well even when, in practice, the opposite is true. Even textbooks are full of stereotypes of social constructions of what should be male and female with little attention to the accomplishments of females.

We talk about history - HISTORY

and so only achievements of men are recorded. In the just concluded Beijing + 5, women fought and got Herstory accepted in the text to draw attention to achievements by females. Gender inequality starts from birth when the birth of a boy is preferred to that of a girl. As they grow up, while boys receive more education, girls have more household responsibilities. Even where in poor families both boys and girls go out to hawk, it is the girls that face dangers of sexual harassment, abuse and rape. Closing the gender gap has to begin from home. Parents must understand that both girls and boys are human beings and the education, love and opportunities you give any child will determine the future of that child. Life experiences have shown that today.

While it is true that it is not easy to give up the position of power, it is equally true that much of the so-called power is ephemeral and women have been found to exercise equal power where they have the opportunity. Hence gender roles are changing sometimes even dramatically and men have remained men. So if it has been beneficial to society when women have the opportunity to contribute to socio-economic, political and even spiritual development, it is logical and appropriate to be responsive to the need for gender equality for the benefit of society.

(d) Laws and policies to protect the rights of the girl child:

In the mission statement of the Platform For Action (PFA) of the Fourth World Conference for Women (FWCW), Beijing 1995, it was stated that "The platform for Action requires immediate and concerted action by all to create a peaceful, just, and humane world based on human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the principle of equality for all peoples of all ages" It is clear that the health, progress and

development of society cannot be assured except the rights of girls and women to equality and full participation in socio-economic and political development are assured, the issue of policies and laws and their implementation and enforcement to ensure the rights of all, particularly girl's and women. Laws should be enacted, reviewed and strictly enforced to protect girls against child labour, early marriage, rape, harmful traditional practices such as FGM to protect the rights of girls.

Conclusion:

These are areas among others, that this girls graduating today from GPI have had information and education. As they leave GPI as regular members today they will face all these social ills. But we request all present and the media to share these messages and educate people, particularly girls, to grow into healthy leaders of tomorrow. Parents should support their daughters as they try to practice what they have learned to reduce risks to their health while pursuing their education for, a better and fulfilling future.

GPI is creating a forum for its graduands, starting from this year, to enable graduands meet and share experiences as well as get additional value from the organisation to reinforce the messages that will assist them to continue to resist unhealthy behaviour. Furthermore, GPI is starting a programme of internship to enable graduands and other young girls interested in becoming peer educators to other young people that do not have the opportunities of learning directly from GPI to receive short periodic training in skills to do so. During the period of intership they would be given some financial assistance to assist them in transportation and other needs.

I thank you all for your presence and your attention. To all the graduands, I say congratulations for your endurance throughout this period. I wish you all the best in life. ♀

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