

Girls' Power: Path to gender equity

A welcome address by Bene E. Madunagu, Coordinator, Cross River/Akwa Ibom Centres & Chairperson, GPI Executive Board, on the occasion of the GPI 10th anniversary & 8th graduation ceremony of the Calabar Centre, Tuesday, August, 3, 2004 at the State Library Complex, Calabar

Protocols

It is with immense joy and immeasurable pleasure that I have the honour on behalf of Girls' Power Initiative (GPI) and myself, to welcome you, all very distinguished guests, colleagues, friends, GPI graduates, GPI graduands, GPI girls at the centres and outreach schools in Cross River State, Akwa Ibom, Edo and Delta states, to this occasion of our 8th graduation ceremony, organised to coincide with the 10 years of GPI experiences with girls, parents, other social networks and institutions in Nigeria.

When in July 1993 we gathered with nine adolescent girls in Calabar and six in Benin-City to start this process of human sexuality education, human rights education, sexual health and rights, reproductive health and rights education, leadership skills and other life management skills education, we had no clue that there would be a day like this when we would make history with such national, regional, and international recognition as witnessed and testified by the presence of all of you in this occasion.

Here, I want to pay tribute to the Nigerian adolescent girls who offered themselves, trusting in us, Grace and I, the founders of GPI to



• Prof. Bene Madunagu, conducting the wife of the CRS Deputy Gov. Mrs. Ifiok Eneji, Comm. for Women Affairs, Mrs Uduak Akiba, Dr. Kole Shettima and Mr. Odey Efenji at GPI Girls Village Atimbo during the foundation stone laying ceremony on August 3, 2004.

be our "guinea pigs", our experimental tools that developed the impetus which eventually put us on the global agenda.

May I humbly call on GPI graduates from 1998 - 2003 to stand up for recognition and honour. And now, may I call on the graduands, the main focus and special beneficiaries of today's ceremony, the 2004 graduating girls to rise and be recognised. I salute you all.

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The Diamonds giving shining example of womanhood; the Seeders, sowing the seeds of gender equality; the Damsels, young but empowered and knowledgeable; the Alphas, first among equals, standing out in the midst of your peers; the Bosoms, the heart of women empowerment; the Pearls, the precious stones that need no introduction as you show that you are empowered girls; the Silvers demonstrating knowledge, empowerment and skills making the uninformed thirsty for the

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knowledge you have; the Precious, yes everyone holds you in awe and respect as you demonstrate such brilliance, knowledge and boldness and show that you are human and not just a girl-child and how can I forget our babies, the Shining Stars; at age 10 and 11 you shine in a crowd like stars, bold and knowledgeable. You have learned at a tender age to be principled and assertive. You really constitute a shining example of womanhood.

I have very strong and abundant faith in all of you young and informed Nigerian adolescents who have kept faith with GPI since 1994. You have sustained my faith that tomorrow will be different, in a positive way, from yesterday and today with regards to gender equality and women's rights as human rights.

You have demonstrated how little adults and institutions with responsibility for your health and development, need to do or spend to ensure a better tomorrow for you. Yes, you adults place mantle of tomorrow's leadership upon, but with no legacy to empower you to do so. The legacy they leave is a burden you have to undo to be able to lead as you have been taught in GPI.

We in GPI set out 10 years ago with a vision. That vision, the GPI vision was, and still remains: "Building a strong and empowered feminist institution with critical consciousness and capacity for analysis of social and gender

prejudices, and commitment to managing and educating girls into healthy, self-reliant, productive and confident women for the achievement of positive changes and transformation of patriarchal values in Nigeria", hence, our logo, "Towards an Empowered Womanhood".

We have kept our faith, interest and commitment in this vision.

Our mission has been: "to empower Nigerian adolescent girls, especially between the ages of 10-18 years and to promote their sexual and reproductive health and rights through comprehensive sexuality, gender and human rights education, counselling and referral services, skills acquisition and social action". Again in the last 10 years we have focused on the mission.

Given the complexity of the needs and aspiration of adolescents in their challenging growing-up years, the impact of discriminatory culture and tradition on the girl-child and women, negative media images of women and discriminatory/sexist gender roles, in our society, GPI had to design strategies with the young girls involvement to be able to address the diverse challenges that the girl-child faces in our society.

Thus, the web of activities in GPI is as comprehensive as it is intricate. It is thus summarised into the following strategies:

- Educational activities with girls, parents and public through the media, seminars and workshops
- Services, e.g. library services, counselling, referral and home visits
- Gender development institute
- Networking, coalition-building and coordination
- Research and publications
- Advocacy for policy implementation
- Capacity-building for staff and girls.

In the 10 years of action, executing the diverse programme activities, we have made some strides in many ways in spite of the thorny road we struggled through.

Some GPI achievements include the following:

- The launching and building of the Gender Development Institute (GDI) to promote gender consciousness through research and training towards inculcating gender equity and equality.
- Community research and intervention programmes in eight communities (four in Cross River and four in Edo states) to stop FGM, using the law in Cross River State and Edo State against FGM
- Gaining the special consultative status of the United Nations Economic and Social Council - ECOSOC in 2001.
- Institutionalised "youth corners" in some schools in Cross

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River and Edo states to facilitate useful information for youths on issues of concerns, expressed by them and the positive impact from school management testimonies.

- Successful in the pilot collaboration with ministries of education in four states: Cross River, Edo, Akwa Ibom and Delta states in the training of school teachers for the implementation of the National Sexuality Education Curriculum.

- Selected by AMANITARE - the African Partnership for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights of African Girls and Women to host "The New Generation" programme coordination.

- Consistent publication of our newsletter in the last 10 years without missing a single issue

- Published 11 books and pamphlets, not including leaflets and other educational literature of similar nature

- Selected as part of the Nigerian team in the exchange programme to Mozambique on youth sexuality, sexual and

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reproductive health and rights to impart the GPI experiences which led to the inclusion of sexuality education in the curriculum of schools in Mozambique

- Successfully graduated seven sets of beneficiaries in both Cross River and Edo State centres, having grown from the initial group of 15 girls in 1994 to an organisation that effectively reaches out to over 30,000 girls in the four centres and outreach schools in four states of the federation.

- Ten years of positive development and institutionalization of GPI, having broken many thorns while increasing the number of blooming Roses.

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There are still a host of practices we are still battling with, while government, convinced of the positive gains of comprehensive sexuality education came up with a National Curriculum and Policy on sexuality education in Nigerian schools. But some retrogressive elements have used their political power to force everyone else into obeying their sexist culture which

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they deliberately embellish and confuse others with religious connotation, to mutilate the name of the policy. It took from 1996 to 2001 to produce the genuine document but within a few months of their dubious intervention they have come up with a clearly inferior document which they have tried in vain to popularise. The same people are now spear-heading dress codes for girls and women, using hungry area boys as vigilantes.

Violations of the bodily integrity of girls and women still continue in various forms such as harmful traditional practices, male-child preference, bride price, etc, as well as others like rape including incestuous rape, and acid baths. Girls who pass through GPI receive information and skills to overcome some of these violations.

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their rights. This is again one way of encouraging discussions widely to prevent the culture of silence that perpetuates discrimination and violation of the rights of girls and women.

Acknowledgements

To survive and sustain 10 years of comprehensive sexuality education in an environment with patriarchal values, GPI has had the support and goodwill of numerous individuals, organisations and institutions.

I would like to publicly acknowledge this fact and I recognise the contributions of the following;

- The adolescent girls who have placed their trust in what we do to keep making our work relevant and

important

- The parents of our girls, who in spite of discouragement from uninformed and conservative/fundamentalists as well as the hostile environment of myths, misconceptions, cultural and social prejudices still remain convinced of the merits of GPI programme to send their wards to be trained in GPI.

- Our collaborators for their individual commitment to support GPI, especially their institutional invaluable resources, materials, financial and technical that have contributed so much to sustain our programme activities.

In particular, permit me to mention the International Women's

Health Coalition (IWHC), the Ford Foundation, the MacArthur Foundation, NOVIB, Netherlands, Equality Now and African Women's Development Fund (AWDF).

Our numerous local supporters who assist us in kind and cash, among others as well as many who have donated books to enrich our library.

- There are also NGOs who have collaborated and networked with us;

- Women activists and colleagues from whom we have benefited intellectually

- The staff of Girls' Power Initiative whose commitment, team work, and work attitude par excellence and their spirit of responsibility for the growth of GPI have made GPI achieve success and

PHOTONEWS



• GPI Benin/Asaba Centres Coordiantor, Grace Osakue (standing, 7th from right) with some graduands and facilitator, during the 8th graduation ceremony in Benin City

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overcome certain social difficulties

- Our media collaborators, print and electronic; Rose Ojiji, Vivian Edet, Abasiubong, Jude, Kunle, Vitalis, etc.

- Our distinguished Board of Trustees members under the

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Chairperson of Prof. Eka I. Braide
the acting Vice- Chancellor of
Cross River State University of
Technology (CRUTECH)

- The state governments in the

four states of Cross River, Akwa
Ibom, Edo and Delta, for providing
the enabling environment for GPI
activities.

- My late parents who believed
in gender equality and educated me
as a girl-child more than 50 years
ago to be who I am today,
respecting the principle of truth and
being committed to what I believe
in. They taught me the virtues of
endurance and persistence and
selfless volunteering service.

- My children, Unoma and
Ikenna for giving me their
understanding, love, trust, believing
and being involved in what I do and
bearing my absenteeism from home

- Finally, my comrade, friend
and husband, Edwin Madunagu
whose support, love, care,
encouragement and total solidarity
in our shared vision for social and
gender justice has been that light that
shapes the core of GPI to remain
focused towards the achievement of
empowered womanhood. He has
been and remains of practical help
in all my endeavours without which
it would have been too difficult for
me to cope.

Thank you all for your patience
and presence. ♀

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• Group photograph of participants during
excursion to the Beta Glass plc, Delta Plant,
Ughelli, Delta State, on May 27, 2004 by
the GPI Benin Centre girls

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