

SOUTH - EAST GRADUATION ADDRESS

Leadership skills and gender consciousness

Address at the occasion of the public education and 2nd graduation ceremony of GPI held at Paradise City Hotel, Atekong Drive, Calabar, on Saturday, July 25, 1998

It is with much delight that I welcome you all to this event. I recognise our distinguished guests, GPI alumnae who have graduated and the graduating members of GPI and the GPI girls still in training. I recognise my colleagues on the staff of GPI both here and in Benin. I recognise the representatives of the Nigerian media and all those who may have come as observers. I salute you all.

We are gathered here today, July 25, 1998 for public enlightenment about GPI and for the 2nd graduation ceremony of Girls' Power Initiative (GPI), South East Zone. Exactly a year ago, on July 26, 1997, in this same place, we graduated the pioneer adolescent members of our organization. We have continued to get feedbacks from the proud parents of those graduands even as we prepare to send off their successors.

GPI focuses attention on adolescent girls, that is, young females aged 10 - 18 years. This is in recognition of the fact that adolescence is generally a time of rapid personal, physiological, social and emotional development of a person. It is during this period that a person learns about, and experiences, sexuality and various forms of human relationships. This is the period when a person develops self-identity and self-esteem. This is the time when people are subjected to severe pressure from peers, the media, and other socialising institutions and relationships that tend to force them

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develop healthy behaviour.

The four years we have spent in developing and executing educational programmes with adolescent girls



Bene Madunagu (Left) and Grace Osakue (right) Coordinators of GPI

to become sexually active, whether they like it or not.

GPI was created to meet the needs of adolescents for accurate information as well as social and emotional support. These they need experience their development in a positive and healthy way and from a gender and human rights perspective. This is because we are cognizant of the fact that in our society parents and institutions are often unable or unwilling to provide the information that young people, especially girls, need. Sometimes they may, by their own examples and behaviour, promote negative, wrong and therefore dangerous information for young people or deny them such information that they require to

have shown beyond reasonable doubt that sexuality education enables young people to make informed sexual health decisions, and decreases the rates of spread of sexually transmitted diseases as well as decreasing unwanted teenage pregnancies and reducing the risk of rape. We have also established that withholding sexuality information from young people does not guarantee abstinence but exposes them to greater risks.

Indeed, because of our relationship with the girls, we share mutual trust, respect and confidence to the extent that we are privileged to learn a lot from them about the frequency

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and pervasiveness of the sexual harassment which girls suffer from boys and men through the unequal power which males enjoy and exercise unduly in society. The public, especially parents, guardians and teachers and indeed the press should learn of this in order to assist in eliminating or at least reducing the risk.

Introducing GPI. GPI is a non-profit, non-commercial, non-religious and non-governmental organisation. GPI is an acronym for Girls' Power Initiative.

Power: refers to the simple dictionary meaning of ability, capacity, strength, to do something. It means boldness, assertiveness, enlightenment, high self-esteem, belief in one's talents and ability and overcoming shyness imposed by social pressures and gaining in self confidence.

Initiative: means the act of taking the first step; being innovative, being creative, having a good idea, common sense, not waiting to be told, knowledge and the ability to take steps to act; having the wisdom to know the right thing to do and being able to do it.

Thus as an organisation, GPI aims at being at the forefront of the struggle to raise womanhood from its age-long underprivileged position of powerlessness and being discriminated against in the family and society, to being recognised as human beings, sharing humanity in partnership with men, and being able to assert their human entitlements.

Our goal is women's empowerment as is stated in our

motto "Towards an empowered womanhood".

By women's empowerment, I mean the process by which women strengthen their capacity and develop their talents individually and collectively to identify, understand and overcome gender discrimination, thus acting to take control of their lives. Empowerment is therefore not used as a slogan. It has definite and concrete content. It means being able to speak out one's mind; knowing and asserting one's rights; breaking the cloak of shyness and ignorance and standing up publicly for one's rights; seeing what is real and not just believing sexist prejudices; feeling safe and comfortable in expressing what one knows to be right; asking, and being firm in doing so.

Why is GPI only for girls?

GPI is for girls only because right from the family, girls suffer discrimination as a result of son preference. It is girls that face pressure from boys and men to engage in sexual activity in spite of the consequences to their health. Girls are more vulnerable to all kinds of violence particularly sexual violence, including rape, sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, denial of information, restriction and open insults of gender roles.

We believe that there should be equality for girls and boys and for women and men. By this we mean that there should be equal nurturing of children, girls and boys alike, at home, in school and in the society. There should be opportunities for equal healthcare services, equal

playtime, equal education and for girls there should be special attention and protection from sexual and economic abuse arising from the undue pressure they suffer.

What does GPI do?

GPI conducts weekly 3-hour meetings/lessons from 3pm-6pm every Sunday afternoon. There are, in addition, other events such as special seminars, the International Women's Day, Skill Training and Excursions. GPI normally informs the parents and requests their written permission for the girls' attendance. GPI has never conducted any event after 6pm on any occasion. We fully understand the risks which young girls face outside at night and so we rather give them tips on how to avoid such risks.

Highlights of the curriculum of GPI include:

Personal Empowerment: Topics such as body image, body hygiene, self-esteem, self identity, assertiveness and knowledge and consciousness of their rights and responsibilities.

Growing-up: This deals with human development, adolescent psychology and pubertal changes.

Interpersonal relationships: To assist the girls to avoid gender based violent experiences, learn about the dangers of gift taking, learn about wrong perceptions about dating, love, infatuation, friendship and intimate relationships. Older girls learn about sexual health including sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), HIV/AIDS, cancer, con-

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traceptives and child bearing, among others.

We also produce quarterly newsletters to pass useful information to girls and the public, and to encourage the girls themselves, to develop writing and reading skills. We also produce occasional pamphlets in response to questions and problems raised by the girls themselves.

To reduce the risks to their health and violation of their bodily integrity arising from depending on men to satisfy their needs, we teach the girls simple skills to empower them economically. We solicit the support of parents to assist the girls practice the skills they have learned.

We take the girls on study excursions to expose them to different kinds of careers and professions that involve better wages than the sexist stereotypical jobs which society shifts to females. Very importantly, we teach girls the consequences of harmful traditional practices such as bride price, female genital mutilation, wife inheritance and various forms of gender prejudices. We do this through lessons that employ phrases of daily occurrence and experience and getting them to stick where it belongs on a flip chart with two columns, one for the female and the other for the male. The girls discuss the implications and draw their conclusions.

To the GPI second set of graduands

I congratulate you all, individually and collectively, for what you have achieved in the last 3 years. I congratulate you for your steadfastness in GPI.

I urge you all to keep the flag flying. You will continue to face pressures because GPI does not have the power to create a new conscious society where you will be understood for the free and empowered human beings you have become today. But my pride is that as long as you resist the pressures and live by the example of the positive changes and knowledge you have acquired through the training in GPI, you, along with your colleagues in GPI, will make it possible for our society to benefit from your sharp sense of social justice. It is my hope that you will contribute your quota to the development of critical consciousness and anti-sexist practices in our society.

You can be good ambassadors only if you consciously practice what you have learned. Adversaries will want to point at your human errors to confirm their misconceptions and ignorance about what GPI is and does. Do not allow them such pleasures of exploiting your weakness.

As you leave today, you are no longer full-time members of GPI but you retain the privilege of using GPI

library anytime and seeking counselling from GPI. We will continue to involve you in our public activities. We shall also continue to publish your articles in the GP Newsletter. We will support you as much as we can to extend your knowledge from GPI to other peers of yours wherever you find yourselves. Beyond that and above all, we shall support you to the best of our ability in your individual and collective endeavours to institutionalise your post GPI - activities.

Conclusion:

GPI is not in the habit of responding to what we are not, since we have much positive output and contribution to show for our existence. It is my hope therefore, that the many questions that were on the minds of those who do not know much about GPI, have been asked and answered in this address.

I will end by acknowledging the involvement, roles and efforts of all the staff of GPI since its inception. What I have said today and this celebration are part of the result of our collective effort. I thank all of them.

Lastly, one of the greatest successes of my leadership of GPI has been as a result of my husband's acknowledgement both indeed and in practice of my rights as a human being. He acknowledges my capability and sees me not just as a wife but as a partner, sharing the common denominator of humanity with him in an equal relationship.

I thank you all, very special and distinguished audience, for your presence, your patience and your attention ♀