

SOUTH EAST REPORTS

Role of GPI in the life of adolescent girls

Address presented by Dr. (Mrs) Bene E. Madunagu, Coordinator, GPI South East zone on the occasion of the GPI South East 1999 Forum for Parents, Teachers and Guardians of GPI girls held at Marian Hotel, Calabar, on March 20, 1999

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you all to this occasion - the 1999 GPI South East Forum for parents, guardians and teachers of GPI girls.

It became very necessary for GPI to institute this forum in order to keep the parents, guardians and teachers of girls attending GPI programme constantly informed about what their wards do in GPI and what GPI does. It is when parents, guardians and teachers know about what their wards are doing and when they are convinced that the programme is beneficial to their wards, that they can support their wards to be regular and consistent for maximum benefit.

Beneficiaries of the GPI programme

The girls in GPI fall under the social category referred to as adolescents.. This is the period of the life of a person between the age of 10 and 19 years. This is the time when an individual

experiences rapid physical and psychological development. That is the period when an individual develops from a child into an adult. These changes occur irrespective of sex, religion or ethnic background. Each person, male or female passes through this period in his or her life time.

In this period, particularly, in the teenage years, values, attitudes and behaviours of a person are in the formative stages. This period also coincides with when individual's begin to detach themselves from parents and spend more time in schools with their peers who come from different background different cultures, different ethnic groups and different faith. They are bombarded with conflicting messages from the media, home, school, peers and so on.

It is also the period when individuals learn about life skills, various forms of human relationships as well as

developing their self- identity and self-esteem. It follows therefore that during this period, individuals have to be properly guided to assist them to make correct decisions for the future.

At home, parents do the best they can to meet this obligation. But since the children spend much time in school and parents have to fend for the upkeep and training needs of the children and the entire family, it follows that practically, though not by plan or design, parents spend less and less time with the adolescent children. Most often both parties may not be around together when the adolescents have pressing problems needing the attention of the parents.

Secondly, many parents may not be very knowledgeable about the scientific facts regarding human development, structures and functions to give adequate information to the adolescent child. Thirdly, there is much misconception and taboo around issues of human sexuality, sexual and reproductive health which make it difficult for some parents to communicate such issues with their adolescents children especially their daughters.

On the other hand, in school, the school curriculum is set to meet the needs of examination rather than the understanding the adolescent requires for life skill development. Meanwhile, while religion teaches the morality surrounding a person's sexual life, the media, both print and electronic teach about scientific findings as well as myths compounding the mixed messages the adolescent received. This



A group photograph of participants at the GPI forum for parents, guardians and healthcare providers held at Marian Hotel, Calabar

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is the practical environment in which the beneficiaries of the GPI programme are located.

GPI therefore acts as a bridge to link and complement what the adolescent did not get from home and school while correcting the myths they pick from interaction with themselves and what they read or watch in the media.

How does GPI operate?

We operate with a set curriculum to meet the level of all participants. The girls in the groups of 10 - 11 years have a set of curriculum different from that of 12 and 13; 14 and 15 and above. While the younger ones learn about their self identity, self image, self-esteem, in short, personal empowerment to inculcate in them the need to appreciate their natural talents and trust in their ability as well as aspire to achieve high social status, the older ones learn about these issues but also more about human anatomy and physiology.

Many of the young ones come in with no ability to communicate. They learn to read and write as well as developing good communication skills. We insist on all the girls coming to lessons with notebooks and pens to take notes. We request you to support and give them this minimal materials and most importantly to always find time to look at what they take down. We give them tips on how to study to do well in school. We urge you to supervise and ensure that your wards have a period of 1 - 2 hours set aside daily to read consistently and understand what is being taught in school in order that they do not get involved in exam malpractices.

We also plan and execute yearly

excursions for our beneficiaries to expose them to different types of careers and professions and the kinds of qualifications required so that they can make good choices of subject combinations to have good professions with high paying profile rather than being limited to stereotyped low paying jobs that women are trained to do through discriminatory social practices.

We acknowledge the fact that many adolescents are poor. They come from poor families or from families that have suffered retrenchment and who cannot afford to meet the cost of their needs. To reduce the risk of sexual exploitation for financial returns, we organise skills training to teach the girls how to use their small pocket money to produce things that can be sold easily to increase their pocket money to meet their needs.

We also run a library service free of charge and accessible to our girls and public at large.

Why only girls in GPI?

GPI pays attention to only girls because they are the only people that society, including parents, openly reject at birth and taunt for being girls. Mothers become sad when they deliver baby girls and abuse God for not giving them a male child. Fathers celebrate the birth of sons and may not go to see the wives in the maternity ward if they deliver baby girls.

Girls grow up hearing things like "why did God not give me a son"? "Oh! You are only a girl", "you cannot do this; you cannot do that" because you are a girl". Girls grow up being made to get the feeling that they are people with leprosy. It is the son that is carried to the club but never the daughter. Beyond the social and parental attitudes to the girl child who is taught to behave

(meaning to have her rights violated) so that she can find a husband, it is the girl child who is raped, assaulted and harassed. It is the adolescent girl who gets deceived and coerced/pressurized into unprotected sex. It is the girl child that is sent out of school for teenage pregnancy while the person who impregnated her remains and finishes school and becomes a highly placed man in society.

It is the girl child that is sold in the name of bride price while the boy goes to school to "keep the family name". Of course history has shown us that whatever legacy someone leaves in his/her life time is what will sustain his/her memory and not how many male children one had. It is the unnecessary but preventable loss of life of our young girls that we care about and want to reduce or eliminate.

CONCLUSION

As you are here with us today, it is important that you ask all the questions on your mind about GPI and insist on answers to know why GPI is good for your daughter or ward.

It is your responsibility also to tell us where you think we have not done well enough or what we have failed to do that you think we should do. I am therefore asking for honest dialogue and comments and your suggestions and recommendations.

Tell us also changes you have seen in your ward that you think GPI has helped to bring about. Speak out your mind about GPI! May I sincerely thank you for accepting our invitation, for your presence and for your attention ♀

Dr. Bene E. Madunagu

Coordinator, GPI South East zone.