

# Sexuality education: Challenges for Nigerian girl-child in the new millennium

*South-East Coordinator of GPI, Bene Madunagu, made this speech at the 6th GPI graduation in Calabar*

VERY distinguished guests,

It is with much delight that I welcome you all on behalf of GPI, South-East zone to this event, marking the 6th graduation of Girls' Power Initiative (GPI).

I thank you all for honouring our invitation; a gesture I regard as a commitment on your part to ensure the healthy development and progress of our children, particularly the girls. Our sons, the boys are important, but they have always been recognised as such in all our communities. The same cannot be said of the girl-child.

Although there has been some positive changes with regards to the social recognition and development of the girl-child, a lot still remains to be done. Your presence, therefore, signifies positive vision and preparedness to provide equal opportunities for both our girls and boys.

## A brief introduction of GPI

GPI is an acronym which stands for Girls' Power Initiative. GPI is a non-government, not-for-profit, non-religious and non-sectarian organisation. GPI was established in 1993 to assist young girls to live healthy life and to achieve their full potentials, develop positive and healthy life management skills and grow into empowered women, with high status and high self-esteem.

We focus on the education, leadership and other non-sexist life management skills and information on sexuality, sexual and reproductive health and rights of adolescent girls, aged 10 - 18 years. We operate from two centres; Calabar in the South-East and Benin City in the South-West, with the national headquarters here in Calabar. Our programmes are aimed at assisting girls to overcome the risks of early sexual activity and adolescent pregnancy; Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs), including HIV/AIDS, unsafe abortion and various forms of gender-based violence such as sexual exploitation and rape.

Our main activities include educational programmes for girls and for the public. Educational programmes take the form of weekly lessons in the centres, school-based



• Bene Madunagu [middle] Eka Bassey [1st left] GPI Principal Facilitator and guests at the ceremony

and referrals, economic skills training, workshops, competitions such as essay, drama, arts, quiz, etc. Public education activities, including newsletters, regular radio and TV programmes, forum for parents and teachers, and information through the media, as well as networking and collaboration with relevant governmental institutions and other NGOs.

GPI runs a 3-year programme, consisting of 3 levels of curriculum to address the age-specific problems of the girl-child. In the third year girls are engaged in social work as part of the graduation requirement.

Our existence is based on the recognition that adolescent girls carry unnecessary extra burden of risk and gender-based violence, but they have very few opportunities to develop their talents and achieve high social, educational, political and economic status because of gender discrimination. They also suffer from persistent traditional practice of son-preference in the patriarchal society we live in.

We are also aware that adolescent girls, irrespective of their diversities such as age, educational status (in or out of school), married or unmarried ethnic, social back-

ground (rich or poor), class (upper or lower), with or without a child (children) or differently abled, etc. are vulnerable to gender-based violence.

In spite of these challenges, adolescent girls lack the basic information about their sexuality, sexual and reproductive health and rights as well as skills to reduce the risks. We are also convinced as the Comoros that no one can clap with one hand. No society can develop by failing to recognise and harness the talents and creativity of half of its population. Hence we believe in assisting girls to achieve their rightful positions in equal partnership with their male counterparts.

## Contemporary challenges to Nigerian adolescent girls:

In Nigeria, the concept of adolescence, the transitional period between childhood and adulthood, is still relatively new. The society is experiencing such changes like puberty, the onset of adolescence, now starting earlier than before. This phenomenon has been explained as being induced by better and balanced diet. Many young people of this age group therefore face

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longer periods of time during which they are sexually mature and may be sexually active, but with no desire or plan for pregnancy and child-bearing. This is not also socially acceptable.

As a result of greater enlightenment, more young people are postponing marriage to stay in school. For some who are out of school, the harsh economic environment militates against their desire for marriage and parenting. Hence, there are now more first pregnancies outside of marriage. Today, the social, economic, political and even religious forces are rapidly changing the ways in which young people experience their adolescence. Adolescents have needs with regards to their sexual and reproductive health. These needs differ from those of adults. These needs are poorly understood and are therefore not adequately served by society. Neglecting such needs has serious implication for the future of these adolescents.

It is clear that risky sexual behaviour during adolescence has far reaching consequences for later life. Out of ignorance many young people get deceived into engaging in sexual activity at an early age, often with multiple casual partners and often without any protection and may end up with unwanted pregnancies or Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs). Those who continue with the pregnancy, drop out of

school and end up most often with complications at delivery that may result in obstructed and prolonged labour leading to Vesico Vaginal Fistula (VVF) or Recto Vaginal Fistula (RVF). Others attempt unsafe abortion with quacks and may end up with maternal mortality or infertility. The adolescent girls in school and those out-of-school, especially apprentices and house helps, go through various forms of sexual abuse and harassment, including rape, unwanted touching, verbal abuse, forced viewing of pornography and incest. Out of ignorance and poverty, they are lured into obtaining gifts and money from partners in return for sexual favours. This is a form of forced prostitution. The new catch now is the various flashy snack bars with fried rice and chicken. This is being followed at a rapid speed with the new technology of cellular phones.

Adolescent girls also receive the wrong message in the process of socialisation that their major role in life is to become a wife and mother. In addition, they get bogged down with household chores of baby-sitting; cooking, washing, taking care of siblings, etc and therefore, cannot cope with school work like their male peers. The new culture of video shops everywhere with free and cheap facilities continue to expose young people to pornographic and sexual activities in the face of ignorance

about the pubertal changes and normal activities for sexual maturity. All kinds of pornographic magazines are found everywhere. Billboards are showing similar suggestive sexual issues. All these are creating confused and conflicting messages for young people. But adults narrowly see the challenges that adolescents face as basic health problems of malaria, cough, alimentary canal infection such as typhoid, etc.

There is little or no thought about challenges and needs arising from their developing anatomy and physiology particularly those relating to secondary sex characteristics of pubertal changes. Society is also blind to gender inequality, gender discrimination and male power in personal relationships, all of which place the women, particularly adolescent girls in a disadvantage of low-esteem, health risks, disempowered position and gender-based violence.

Hence, today's adolescents face growing threats to their health, such as HIV/AIDS and unwanted pregnancy. Adolescents are extremely vulnerable to STIs due to lack of information, imbalance of power in their personal relationships and in sexual relations between women and men, whether young or old, and the greater vulnerability of girls.

### Sexuality education:

Let us face it. Adolescents have to deal with these life challenges, tough issues, including trying to do well in school, resisting peer pressure, making decisions about sexual activity and their sexuality, experimenting with alcohol and drugs, resisting sexual abuse and harassment, etc. All of these issues are related to their sexuality. Sexuality is an important part of who you are as female or male. Sexuality includes how you feel about your body, how you express yourself, the way you act in relationships and how you interact with males and females. Thus, sexuality is a natural, integral part of every human being. Its expression is influenced by personal and social factors. Broadly speaking, sexuality encompasses five aspects namely human development, emotions and relationships, sexual health, sexual behaviour and sexual

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violence.

Thus, children grow up receiving messages everyday directly or indirectly about their sexuality. The sources of these messages include parents and other relatives, close friends, peer groups, teachers, media (print and electronic), religious institutions, social norms (spoken and unspoken) health care institutions and providers (modern and traditional) music, lyrics, etc. Sexuality education happens in everyone's life whether we plan to do so consciously or informally.

But what children and adolescents require is comprehensive sexuality education which is consciously planned to teach them about their biological, psychological, socio-cultural and spiritual aspects of their lives (human sexuality) so as to enable them to develop skills and attitudes that will help them face healthy sexual life behaviours. Indeed, comprehensive sexuality education approaches sexuality as it is and should be, as a natural, positive and healthy part of human life which addresses the pleasures and joys of human life as well as the fears and undesirable aspects such as gender-based violence and STIs.

We hear of sex education, family life education, population education and sexuality education. People get confused about these labels. People oppose sex education in schools for the fear that it will spoil young people. So, they recommended family life education. What do these terms mean? Sex education lays emphasis on sexual anatomy and physiology, puberty, reproduction, STIs., HIV/AIDS and pregnancy prevention. The aim is to prepare young people for puberty and prevent teenage pregnancies and STIs.

**Family life education**

This lays emphasis on family life, relationships in terms of preparation for marriage, parental skills. It may include population growth, personal health, nutrition, self-esteem and gender roles. Some programmes of Family Life Education (FLE) may include reproduction, contraception and sexual behaviour. It is seen to be acceptable as it talks about family.

**Population education**

This emphasises population growth as well

as economic and environmental issues. It relates these issues to the individual to encourage people to adopt family planning and have fewer children. It hardly includes information on human sexuality and even contraception.

**Comprehensive sexuality education**

This is a broad approach to human sexuality, including who we are as female or male; our biological, physical, mental, psychological relationships of a person as a human being in a society. It covers economic, social, cultural and gender perspectives. It covers life management skills. It explores values, develops social skills with the goal of promoting sexual and reproductive health.

**Benefits of comprehensive sexuality education**

The girls we are graduating today represent some of the benefits of comprehensive sexuality education. We will get a tip of this from their presentations during this occasion. That these girls at their young age have risen above the social pressure of only being seen and not heard to assume the power for public speech comfortably with accurate information on human sexuality is a testimony of the gains of comprehensive sexuality education that they have received in the last three years from GPI.

Sexuality education increases communication with parents, especially about sexual matters which enables young people to get the parental guidance they need for more responsible behaviour. It has the benefit of increasing self-esteem and decision-making skills among beneficiaries. This enables them to assert their rights and responsibilities, responsibly and effectively. It enables beneficiaries to clarify their values in life and hence allow them set goals and take responsible educational and social actions that would enhance the achievement of such goals. It also increases the knowledge and personal skills and comfort with their sexuality which enables them to take actions to protect their bodily integrity and reduce risks that arise from ignorance. It helps beneficiaries delay the onset of sexual activity and, for older sexually active young women, to protect themselves when they do decide to be-

gin sexual activity. Parents and the beneficiaries of GPI comprehensive sexuality education programmes will be in a position to say more about what they get as benefits.

**The way forward**

Young people have specific needs for information and services that couples and adult-centred clinics do not provide. In addition, adolescents often hesitate to go to or often they get turned away from clinics because most service providers are not trained in providing youth-friendly services. It is therefore essential that comprehensive sexuality education and information be backed up by accessible, confidential youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health services.

I use this opportunity to appeal to the state ministry of health to designate special space in the existing health facilities to serve as youth-friendly health clinics. We on our part, in GPI would then offer to provide information materials that children can read while waiting to see the health provider. We also offer to train health personnel that would be assigned to the Youth-Friendly Health Centres (YFHC) in youth counselling skills.

The idea of sexuality education often provides misconceptions and negative reactions from the parents and public alike. This arises from ignorance about the concept, "Sexuality." Now that the federal government, through the federal ministry of education in collaboration with the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) has approved the national sexuality education curriculum for upper primary, junior and senior secondary schools and tertiary institutions, people really have no basis for such opposition anymore.

We all owe ourselves the responsibility of being current to enable us to collectively face the fast social changes occasioned by the present-day realities of information technology and globalisation.

Government should ensure that children, especially adolescents receive comprehensive sexuality education and information both in schools and through other so-

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cial and community-based institutions like NGOs such as GPI.

Government should desire or support programmes that involve parents. Teachers, healthcare providers, religious and community leaders in partnership with youth-serving NGOs in the provision of sexuality education to children, especially adolescents. Parents and guardians should support and encourage their wards to seek sexuality information to guide them in their development and responsible behaviour.

### **To the graduands**

I congratulate you all today for this achievement for your successful completion of the 3-year comprehensive sexuality education and information in GPI. We as an organisation have assisted you to develop knowledge, communication, decision-making, negotiation leadership and life-management skills to help you make your

transition from childhood to adulthood less stressful, but in good sexual health. We have given you the GPI rights and responsibilities. It is now your responsibility to use this privilege and opportunity we have provided for you in making your life a success by pursuing your goal in life.

You are still free to utilize our library and counselling services. As you leave GPI as a regular member in terms of attending lessons, we would like to remind you that you should demonstrate in your life, positive behaviour and pass on by any means of your choice through writing, discussions, etc, what you have gained, to others around you.

In conclusion, I would like to thank the International Women's Health Coalition (IWHC), The Ford Foundation and the MacArthur Foundation for their technical, material and financial support to GPI in

executing the programmes whose success we mark today in this 6th graduation ceremony.

I would also like to thank the team of supportive media correspondents who have stood by us since inception - Increase Abasi-ubong, Kunle Johnson, Jude Okwe and Vitalis Ugoh. This event would not have taken place without the collective team work of all GPI staff. I seize this opportunity to publicly acknowledge the relentless efforts of our staff in bringing up the girls some of whom are graduating today. There are numerous silent supporters of our programme most especially my comrade, partner, friend and husband, Edwin Madunagu and others, too numerous to list in this brief address. Once again I thank you all very distinguished guests for your presence and patience in the attention you have given to this address ♀