

# The Role of Girls' Power Initiative in the Empowerment Process for Nigerian Women

*Being an opening address on the occasion of the peer educators' assessment workshop and graduation ceremony held at Paradise City Hotel, Calabar on July 26, 1997*

It is with great pleasure, that I welcome you here today, July 26, 1997, for the graduation of the pioneer adolescent members of our programme Girls' Power Initiative (GPI). South East.

The motor of GPI "Towards an Empowered Womanhood" explains what we are about to witness. We are today presenting the first set of GPI graduands who, we are convinced, have developed and become more empowered than their peers as they march into womanhood.

The programme started in July 1994, which means GPI is three years old this month. GPI trains adolescent girls of ages 10-19, through dialogue, leadership and communication skills to develop their full potentials as human beings. Through dialogue the many social myths and misconceptions that constitute barriers and constraints to the achievement of the total emancipation, involvement and participation of Nigerian women in decision making and other processes of development are broken down.

Factual scientific information is provided to break down class, gender and patriarchal values internalised by women and men during the socialisation process. They learn about their fundamental rights as human beings and various legal provisions such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Convention on the Rights of the child, among other instruments that protect those rights. Emphasis is placed on the curriculum in the areas of sexual and reproductive health and

By



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rights of women from a gender and class perspective. Our Newsletter, the Girls' Power (GP) has been a source of inspiration, information and knowledge, and hence, a tool for women's empowerment.

The girls graduating today from GPI South East zone, recognise and know their responsibilities and have been and are still involved in various community activism of educating their peers and the public at large. I am confident that, as they go into various institutions and society at large, they will continue to influence everyone around them positively towards social action and changes for a just society.

To the graduands, my challenge is that you individually and collectively create a programme similar to GPI to educate your peers wherever you may find yourselves. You only cease to be regular members of GPI today but you remain GPI alumni. You will continue to receive the newsletter, Girls Power (GP). You are still welcome to use the GPI library, seek counselling from us and you may from time to time receive invitation from us to public events of GPI.

It is my hope that what you have

learnt from us will continue to guide your lives and that you will not hesitate to enrol in the feminist movement for social justice in our country and beyond. Overcoming false consciousness is a mighty weapon in the struggle of the oppressed and exploited, for a more just society. False consciousness is here defined simply as that form of consciousness that helps perpetuate the oppression and exploitation you suffer. True consciousness leads you to see through your real situation and to reject it.

Today's graduands are peer educators who would influence their peers and empower them, through information, to play the roles, as from human beings, in social development.

In GPI, girls become convinced that no female sells her rights through marriage and therefore they understand why they should assert their rights. Our society socialises girls to be passive and boys to be aggressive. In GPI girls learn that in any situation of relationship, it is not right to be passive, nor is it right to be aggressive. What is correct is to be assertive and to communicate your views effectively but politely.

Our graduating girls have been exposed to various careers through excursions to break the stereotype of "female professions". They understand that the intellectual capacity, creativity and physical structures like hands, eyes, legs, etc, are used in the performance of technical functions. And they possess all these. They have learnt various skills to empower them economically, to

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to empower them economically, to protect them from exploitation. The saying that "knowledge is power" has been effectively utilised in GPI to empower the participants. GPI girls know that they have a right to make decisions about their sexual and reproductive health and they have received training on skills to effectively assert those rights politely but firmly. Our three years experiences have shown us that women exposed to information and knowledge will develop high self-

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esteem and be empowered to fight justice.

I would like to seize this opportunity to acknowledge the roles and efforts of all my colleagues in GPI's Project Execution Team. The celebration today is our collective celebration. In particular I would love to mention the involvement in the programme of Mrs. Eka Bassey who was for long the only facilitator in the programme. She started with me at the beginning of the programme and it

was in her residence that we held our meetings for several months, before we acquired a permanent co-ordinating centre for GPI. My husband has been a continuous intellectual resource and practical support to me throughout this programme. His expert advice and criticisms have contributed immensely to the success we are here celebrating today.

I thank you all for accepting our invitation to celebrate this occasion of our first graduation ceremony. Today GPI marks its third year of its existence.