

Young girls especially females within my community face lot of challenges while growing up. To help them cope with these challenges there is need for sexuality education which will assist them make informed decisions when faced with such challenges.

I will state that community problems could be defined as challenges and concerns encountered by a group of people living interdependently in a particular geographical location, having similar lifestyles and sharing common social goals. These problems vary from place to place due to cultural, traditional and social norms, peculiar to those people as well as economic realities/situation, teenage pregnancy, sexual exploitation, discrimination, parental neglect, harmful traditional practices e.g. Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), early marriage and male child preference Trafficking are among the many health challenges faced by young people especially girls in my community.

Female children are regarded as second class citizens, unwanted and beasts of burden while the boys are regarded as assets of the family. This discrimination is exhibited even before even before birth. When a woman is pregnant, if she gives birth to a baby girl everybody goes home with gloomy faces but when the baby boy is born there is merry making as the mother of the baby will be loved and appreciated by her husband and his relatives but the reverse is the case of the birth of a baby girl.

Thus discrimination continues even during growing up. While the boys are enrolled in the best schools the girls are given little or no opportunity. Even when such opportunities exist the girls are not enrolled in the same best school like the boys. At home the boys are given more time to read but the girls are mandated to do all the domestic chores leaving her in little or no time to read.

This is not different from the situation I face in my family as the only child at the time. Growing up for me was tough; I was fighting the denials, subjugation and even the negligence I face by one of my parents and relatives.

This affected me physically and psychologically. The effects of these were devastating if not for the timely intervention of Girls Power Initiative (GPI).

Arising from the need to regain back my confidence in life, at age 13 I became involved in this youth serving non-governmental organization. Girls Power Initiative (GPI) which focuses on the empowerment of the girl child through a 3-year sexuality educational programme for adolescent girls age 10-18 with focus on issues of personal empowerment, growing up, interpersonal relationships, sexual and reproductive health and rights, violence against girls/women, legal protection and youth activism .

During my stay in this programme, I regained my confidence back my activism for women's right was also sparked up. I became an advocate on sexuality education issues through campaigns seminars and also through the media. The most spectacular experience was that of the television programme, "The Girl Child". I was involved as a discussant in this TV programme which addressed topical issues on sexuality and girls/women's right from a gender based perspective. At the end of each TV discussion my parent's colleague would send questions and concerns to me and I would reply them through writing. Questions on parent child communication, conflict management and infertility were raised by my parents colleagues and other viewers who watched me.

As one of the criteria for graduation in GPI after completion of the 3 years programme the graduating group is expected to identify a

community and carry out community intervention and Social action based on the needs assessment of that community. In our set we identified Akpap Okoyong community in Cross River State. Outcome of the needs assessment in this area was the prevalence of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), teenage pregnancy, early marriage, wife battery and widowhood rites.

Methodologies used in addressing these issues were, question/answer sessions, video watch and experience sharing. The outcome of this activity was a pledge by the community leaders to execute a law, against FGM and Trafficking. On a personal capacity I often conduct interpersonal counseling session for young people in my church and neighborhood. I try to change the mind set of young persons from a people who just want to live to survive to a people who want to live to make a change/difference. In these sessions I addressed teenage pregnancy, rape, human trafficking, gender based violence, HIV/AIDS, conflict resolution and leadership. I debunk the misconceptions people in my community have about sexuality education. Some refer to sexuality as sex, some say it corrupts young people others say it over exposes them.

I thoroughly explain what sexuality means and its components. I highlight on the fact that sexuality offers young people the opportunity to make informed decisions, know more about the processes of growing up as well as their right and responsibilities. I do this by using a right /gender based approach knowing that everyone has a right to this information but I also make it age specific. I also carry out community intervention based on the needs assessment in my community. Below are highlights of such interventions.

I came across a scene where a woman was planning to carry out FGM on her daughter. I educated her on the meaning, types and

consequences of FGM. The woman in her response said that FGM is our culture. I responded that I promote positive cultures such as our dance and cuisines but FGM is a culture which exposes women and girls to numerous consequences. It also violates the bodily integrity, sexual and reproductive rights of girls and women.

I reminded her of the time we had a culture of killing of twins in our community, but that negative culture was stopped by Mary Slessor. This therefore proves that culture is not static but its dynamic, its made and also abolished by humans if it no longer serves human. She changed her mind and thanked me for that enlightenment.

Another scene was when a woman was supposed to be made to go through all the dehumanizing widowhood rites to vindicate herself over the accusation by the relatives of her husband so as to prove if she was responsible for his death. She was mandated to drink the water used in bathing the husband's corpse. I intervened by informing those involved that, that water is infectious as such it contains germs and other pathogens which could result in complications, infections and even death. I further explained that when two people marry they become one; but when the husband dies, the wife is being accused of being responsible, she is made to go through painful experiences like jumping over the bank of the river several times without falling, being locked up in the same room with the corpse and being given food in an unwashed plate, not having her bath until the corpse is buried. The case is different for the man when his wife dies he is not accused of murder rather, he is even encouraged to marry another wife even with the wife's corpse in the mortuary.

I also intervened in a scene of wife battery where a husband battered his wife. I explained to them that every relationship should be based on mutual respect and understanding. But when any of the partners

especially the male dominates or inflicts any form of abuse either physically, psychologically or otherwise there is need for these partners to seek counseling and information which will assist him or her make informed decisions. This intervention work made me realize that I have a lot of work to do. The reason for this realization is that not every young person is as fortunate as I was to be involved in GPI. So I decided to be an advocate for change in my community.

Upon graduation from GPI, I joined the GPI Alumnae Association (GAA) where we have made contributions on providing accurate and factual information on sexuality to young people. As part of activities that GAA executes the first ever youth talk show on campus was launched last year 2005. I was one of the five panelist and the only representative of the alumnae in the panel. Issues such as dressing, conformity, student–lecturer relationship, sexual harassment, rape and dating were amongst the many issues that were raised. I couldn't have been able to address these issues in not for the knowledge of sexuality. I so much appreciate sexuality education because it pre-informs young people about life , it also gives them the opportunity to make informed decisions in life as a panacea to the “learning by experience” process which might have devastating effects in their lives.

GPI at an organizational level and I as an individual have been working on changing the perceptions of the girls, boys, parents and government. A drastic change have been the results as girls now have better focus in life. Unlike before girls had the “I am going to be married” impression, this made them lazy as they equated marriage to a bed of roses which isn't so. Information on sexuality has so much change their belief, currently every girl strives to make her personality than depend on her husbands’.

This result is also visible especially in our university. In my class the number of males compared to boys is about 30%-70%. This shows that many girls are now in school and the parents are also willing to educate their female children.

My action plan for the future is to introduce an on-line counseling service. I shared this vision with GAA and it has been adopted as our core project. The reason for this service is to provide an alternative to people who may not want to access the face to face counseling service. This is also aimed at reaching a greater target to ease the stress of transportation from any part of my country to our office, rather than paying so much money on transportation, one could easily call or write letter and ask a question or raised a concern. This on-line counseling is going to entail a postal letter service, a hotline, an email and possibly an e-chat service. Clients wishing to utilize this service will be requested to call or email their concerns anonymously. With our team of trained non-judgmental counselors, this we believe would save lives of especially young people who may not be able to make the right decision which may be the solution to that particular problem.

I suggest that young people should effectively utilize the efficiency of sexuality education. This education should not just be studied but applied as this will help solve the health problems affecting young people as the world could have healthy youths to lead it.

Parents should treat their children equally not withstanding the sex of the child. They should create time to interact with their children, take their children as friends because this will help build trust, confidence and good communication in the family.

Governments should make and implement youth friendly policies so as to forestall the rate of crime, gangsterism, violence and death of young people due to ignorance, HIV/AIDS and other STIs. Governments should

also protect and preserve the future of young people knowing that they are the desired leaders of tomorrow.

Conclusively I will state that the desire to make a change results in problem solving through community intervention where the needs of such communities are addressed. This desire was what led to the emergence of GPI and GAA. Through GPI's effort today we have young girls who are role models and mentors to others.

Problems solving could come in ways of inspiring someone's mind, encouraging one's heart and touching one's soul. With sexuality education I have been able to make a difference.