

**Girls' Power Initiative
(GPI) NIGERIA**

towards an empowered womanhood

**Sexuality Education
Series**



Young Persons

No1

**DECISION-MAKING:
POSTPONING SEXUAL ACTIVITIES**

Editors

**Bene Madunagu
Imoh Bernard-Ekott**



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INTRODUCING GIRLS' POWER INITIATIVE (GPI), NIGERIA

Girls' Power Initiative (GPI), is a nongovernmental, non-profit making, non-sectarian and non-religious organisation. GPI focuses on the education, leadership and other nonsexist life management skills as well as information on sexual and reproductive health and rights of adolescent girls, aged 10- 18 years, in Nigeria. GPI is co-ordinated from two centres in the country, namely, Benin - City in Edo State and Calabar in Cross River State. The national secretariat is housed at the Calabar Centre. GPI was founded in 1993 by Bene Madunagu and Grace Osakue who now coordinate the Calabar and Benin Centres, respectively. GPI commenced regular weekly educational classes for girls in July, 1994. It is a three-year programme for each participant. Hence, there have so far been three sets of GPI graduates. GPI now has a consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council. (ECOSOC).

DECISION-MAKING: POSTPONING SEXUAL ACTIVITIES

Introduction

Naturally, every human being is a sexual being. But have you ever wondered why the mention of the word, sex is often treated with such passionate disapproval? Could this state of affairs be the result of so much mistakes and hence heartaches from consequences of ignorance? Sex is the natural part of our biological existence. Every human being is born male or female. There are few exceptions though. Well, think about it. Sex is important from the moment we are born. The first question a parent asks is, “Is it a boy or a girl?” Part of who we are and how we act is determined by whether we are male or female.

At birth, the sex of a baby, that is whether you are a male or female, is determined by looking at the sexual organs. A baby girl has a vulva and baby boy has a penis. At birth the first sign of life to onlookers is when the baby, whether male or female cries. This is the same for female and male new borns. Thereafter, the babies enter into gender differentiation. Although all babies, whether they are male or female act nearly the same way. girls would be dressed in “girls' clothes” and boys in “boys' clothes.”

Beginning at a very early age. little girls are treated and expected to behave differently from little boys.

Then later on from the ages of nine years onwards, the bodies of girls and boys go through changes, called puberty, which would further make girls' bodies even more different from boys bodies. Puberty brings on the bodily changes that mark the beginning of growing up sexually. A very common part of becoming a teenager involves learning from the stage of infants, how males and females are supposed to act sexually. Thus, what is regarded as natural attribute of females and males is really what one learns during the growing-up years as constructed by society.

As young people are reaching reproductive maturity at earlier ages, they often make choices about sexual behaviour without fully comprehending possible consequences. Many times, girls and boys are pressured into sexual intercourse when they don't really want to be sexually involved. This is as a result of the culture of silence that keeps growing-up children in the dark about life realities and about their sexuality.

This publication is, therefore, to assist young persons on the following:

1. To help them understand their natural curiosity about sexual intercourse to be able to take informed and responsible decisions.

To increase the ability of young people, through information and skills to grow up healthy with less risks.

To assist young people in coping with social and peer pressures through the development of skills which they can use to effectively say "no" to behaviours that they do not

wish to engage in.

4. To enable them to make the right choices regarding their sexuality, sexual and reproductive health and rights.
5. To build their capacity to resist sexual exploitation, and hence, postpone sexual intercourse.

Understanding your natural curiosity about sex

As a young person, you would probably find yourself wondering about sexual intercourse: “What is it?” and “what is having 'sex' really all about?” Being curious about sexual intercourse at your age is natural and normal. This curiosity comes from many different sources.

All girls and boys go through a special time called puberty. During puberty, their bodies change to become sexually mature. This is natural resulting from naturally occurring chemicals in their bodies called hormones, which stimulate the development of secondary sexual characteristics.

The changes come at different times for boys and girls. For girls, puberty begins between eight and 18 years.

On the average, girls start having their menstrual periods at about the age range of 10-12.

For boys, puberty usually begins between the age of 12 and 15 years. On the average, boys start producing sperms by about age 13.

Once a girl starts having her periods, and a boy starts producing sperms, they are physically capable of having babies if they engage in sexual intercourse.

But changes in how our bodies work are not the only changes that happen during puberty. Our thoughts and feelings change, too. We get sexual feelings - like wanting to be close to another person and showing them that we care, giving and receiving affection with same or opposite sexes.

However, experimenting with sexual intercourse as a way to satisfy curiosity is not a healthy way for adolescents to learn about sexual activity.

Young people often have mixed feelings about sexual involvement and simply don't know what to do about their feelings due to the silence that surrounds this subject. Yet, they are naturally curious about sexual issues because of the changes that occur in their bodies. These changes are natural and not under their control. At the same time, they may feel shame and guilt about having sexual thoughts, feelings and fantasies, since the message is often "DON'T." with no explanation other than that it is sinful and yet, they watch adults commit grievous sins.

Be assured that having such thoughts and feelings is normal. It is also natural and normal if you don't have sexual

thoughts and feelings at this time. Some young people may not be aware of them until later in life. Whatever the situation, you need information and skills to guide you not to be "sinful."

Although it is natural and normal if you do have sexual feelings during your adolescent years, it is important that you remember that:

It is OK to **THINK** about sexual issues

It is OK to **TALK** about sexual issues

It is OK to **DEVELOP** feelings and attitudes about sexual issues.

BUT

It is **NOT** OK to **ACT OUT** or experiment with such thoughts, or feelings without full understanding of the consequences and responsibilities associated with such actions which are vital for you to make the right choices.

Reasons why young persons become sexually involved

Many young people engage in early sexual activity for the following reasons:

- ◆ Everyone is doing it
- ◆ To feel grown up or smart
- ◆ To be smart, cool, sexy, etc.

- ◆ To prove that they love someone
- ◆ To belong
- ◆ To gain weight
- ◆ To feel loved
- ◆ To avoid boredom
- ◆ Not to be left out
- ◆ For pleasure or fun
- ◆ As rebellion against parents/guardians/adults in general
- ◆ They see it on TV, in the movies and in print media sources.

Some consequences of early sexual activity

- Sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS: This is one reason why the incidence of HIV/AIDS is most common among young people aged 15-19 years.
- Unwanted/unintended pregnancy
- Dropping out of school, in the case of girls.
- Depression
- Unsafe abortion and serious consequences, including life-long debilities or even death.
- Negative reputation and changed personality.
- Having to get a job to support a child.

- Poverty and possibly forced prostitution to support self and child as well as a cycle of risks.
- Sour relationships with boyfriend or girlfriend, parents, friends, etc.
- Low self-esteem.
- Loss of self-respect, and feeling differently about oneself.
- Having a baby at an early age, ending up with too many babies and an uncertain future for self and children. Chances of further sexual abuses.
- Long and obstructed labour, ending up with complications such as Vesico-Vaginal Fistula (VVF) - (leaking of urine) or Recto-Vaginal Fistula (RVF) - (leaking of faeces).
- Serious or life-threatening illness due to pregnancy
- Low birth weight and pending malnutrition for baby if born alive.
- Cervical cancer.
- Death.

This is not to scare you but to help you develop a realistic view about life. Any of these can occur as a result of making the choice of sexual activity out of ignorance and hence totally unprepared.

Making decisions about sexual involvement

Decision-making is a life-long process, it starts in infancy and continues throughout our lives. The kind of decisions we make as young people affect the way we live as adults. It can also influence our future choices putting us in perpetual stress.

As you make your decisions, you may be tempted to give in to outside pressures or you may try to put off making the decision altogether. When this temptation arises, remind yourself that however you do it, decision-making cannot be avoided. Accurate information about your sexuality, sexual and reproductive health and rights is paramount to help you make the right decision.

To make the right decision about handling sexual interests and feelings, young people need information and advice from people and sources they trust.

Should I engage in sexual intercourse or should I wait?

Before you decide on what you want to do, it is important to be clear on what you believe and why, because the choices you make today can affect you for years to come. Decision about sexual activity may be one of the most important decisions you will ever make. So, think before you act. It is your life and no one loves you more than you love yourself. The decision is in your hands to remain healthy and informed in order to make the right choice.

Here is a checklist that may help you decide what is best:

Deciding about sex

	Yes	No
Is having sexual intercourse in agreement with my own moral values?		
Would my parents approve of my engaging in sexual intercourse now?		
If I have a child, am I responsible enough to provide for its emotional and financial support?		
If the relationship breaks up, will I be glad I had sexual intercourse with this person?		
Am I sure no one is pushing me into having sexual intercourse?		
Why does my partner want to have sexual intercourse now?		
Can I take full responsibility for my actions?		
Am I willing to risk HIV/AIDS or other sexually transmitted diseases and the consequences?		

Am I ready to risk becoming pregnant and dropping out of school?		
Can this pregnancy result in complications that can lead to infertility?		
Am I ready to give birth and give my baby up for adoption?		
Am I willing to lose my reputation and self-worth and mar my future career and my life goal in		
Can I handle being a single parent? Am I ready and able to support a child on my own?		
Can I handle the shame, guilt and conflict I may feel?		
Will my decision hurt others - my parents, my friends?		

Now that you have taken a decision to wait since you cannot risk all the above, the next thing is to be able to resist the pressure to be involved in sexual activity when you do not want to do so yet. You need to develop strong refusal, negotiating and resistant skills. You need to be firm with your resolve to postpone sexual intercourse. Note that there are 101 ways of pleasurable

relationship without involving in sexual intercourse.

Some tips on how to resist pressure and postpone sexual activity

- ◆ Be clear on why you have resolved to postpone sexual activity. Make a definite personal decision to be consistent with your decision until you review your situation and consciously decide to do so, convinced that you are ready for such responsibility and its consequences. Your parents raised you. It is your responsibility to raise your own children.

- ◆ Avoid being alone with someone to whom you are sexually/physically attracted in order not to be tempted.

- ◆ Set your limits in all forms of relationship and avoid being cajoled into going beyond those limits.

- ◆ If your partner is honest with you, he/she will respect your limits and decision to postpone sexual activity.

- ◆ If you find yourself alone with someone who makes unwanted sexual advances, say ‘No’ and leave the scene.

Talk about the issue, the situation and what your stand point is.

Say “No” with words like, “I do not want to have sex,” or “I do not want to join such group; “ I do not want to

smoke.”

Say “No” with your body and all your non-verbal messages, make eye contact that says, “No” and be firm and assertive about it.

Stand back from the person who is pressurizing you, especially if it is sexual pressure, and look the person in the eye and affirm your position and walk away.

Keep repeating “No” without giving any excuses or reasons each time this happens and end the relationship if he/she insists.

Turn the conversation around and let him or her know how you feel about being pressured into doing something that is not in your best interest.

Leave the situation, refuse to discuss the matter anymore and walk away if necessary when you have clearly made your point.

Whenever unwanted advances are made, whether spoken or unspoken (by glances, touch, gestures), say “No” firmly with no false or positive body language.

Watch your body language. Your body language must always act in the same way with your voice. If you say "No," you must act "No."

Reject unnecessary touching; say "please do not do that again. I don't like it." If the person touches you again after that, make a strong point, e.g. leave the scene and the relationship, report to your parent or a counsellor.

Always remind yourself that any person who persistently

pursues you for intercourse even after you have made yourself clear, does not care for you deeply (even if he/she tells you he or she is unable to eat or sleep for want of you). This is a clear sign of abusive relationship with no respect for your feelings.

Do not accept gifts that have conditions attached and always watch out for the motives of the other person. Choose your friends carefully. Don't base your choice on how they look or what they have, but on their personalities, human qualities, (are they Kind? Disciplined? Hardworking? Honest?, etc.). Make your choice of friends based on common values, people with life enhancing goals.

Never experiment with drinks, cigarettes and drugs in the company of friends or alone for that matter. Such may make you lose your sense of judgement, and you become too weak to assert yourself, etc Even if you take only soft drinks when you are with friends of the opposite sex, watch out for set-ups, because you may be drugged without your notice. Some powder can be rubbed on a slice of cake without your notice. Something can be dropped inside a bottle of soft drink. Please play safe.

Do not accept free car rides (lift) from strangers and even from certain class of friends (especially older people).

Do not go with a stranger to show him/her a direction. Advise the person to look for a police officer or traffic warden.

When all the above suggestions fail, **open your mouth and shout for help.**

Some common pressure lines and responses to help resist sexual pressures

LINE 1: Everybody has a boyfriend/girlfriend

REPLY: Well, I' m not everybody, I'm me. Besides. I know that what you are saying is not true.

LINE 2: If you care about me, you would do more than just saying you care

REPLY: If you care about me, you will respect my feelings and not push me into doing something I'm not ready for.

LINE 3: Touching or kissing each other is just part of growing-up

REPLY: No way! Being grown-up to me means deciding what I know to be right for me and then sticking to those decisions.

LINE 4: You let me touch or kiss you once before, so what's the problem now?

REPLY: I've a right to change my mind and I don't want to do that anymore.

LINE 5: You are still a little kid

REPLY: I'm not a little kid, but I'm not old enough to do what you are asking me to do.

LINE 6: Don't worry. You won't get pregnant.

REPLY: **You don't know that for sure! J don't want to risk**

getting pregnant.

LINE7: You've gotten me all excited, now you have to do it

REPLY I don't have to do anything I don't want to do.

LINE 8: I love you. Show me you love me

REPLY: If you really love me. you won't pressure me to do something I don't want to do.

LINE 9 : All your friends are doing it. Why not you? REPLY:

What my friends decide to do is their business. I make my own decisions.

If you know how to deal with these pressures, it means you will have more control over your life to make decisions that are right for you. It will give you time until you are ready to get into sexual activity.

Remember, when others say to you that you should be doing something so that you'll be a grown-up, because everybody is doing it, or because they love you, you should be able to think of things to say to resist that kind of pressure. If you can't think of anything to say, just say "no." That's your right. You don't owe anyone an explanation.

Also, it is important that you know what you want out of life. What your goals and ambitions are and how you can achieve them. Think about how an unplanned pregnancy will affect your future. Remember most often, a girl is forced to leave school, putting a stop to her education and future plans. Don't forget, the

only 100% effective way to prevent unplanned pregnancy, HIV/AIDS and other Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) is to avoid sexual involvement altogether when you are not informed enough to be able to protect yourself or old enough to carry the responsibilities of casual or unprotected sexual intercourse.

And don't forget, having sexual intercourse won't make you more of a man or woman or more grown-up any sooner. Be sex-wise!!!

Bene E. Madunagu

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