CULTURE AND ADOLESCENTS' CONCERNS ON SEXUALITY

VOLUME THREE
BODY IMAGE

By

GIRLS' POWER INITIATIVE
(GPI) NIGERIA

"towards an empowered womanhood"

Calabar/Benin
NIGERIA

Edited and Introduced by
BENE E. MADUNAGU

SEPTEMBER, 1999

CULTURE AND ADOLESCENTS' CONCERNS ON SEXUALITY

VOLUME THREE

BODY IMAGE

GPI ADDRESSES:

SOUTH EAST CENTRE:
44 Ekpo Abasi Street
P. O. Box 3663 UNICAL Post
Office, Calabar, Nigeria
Tel: (234) 87 - 230929
Fax (only): (234) 87 - 236298
E-mail: gpi @ fordwa . linkserve . org

SOUTH-WEST CENTRE:
No 2 Hudson Lane
Off 85 Akpakpava Street by
Dawson Junction
P. O. Box 7400, Benin City
Tel/FAX (234) 52-255162
FAX only: (234) 52-250668
E-mail: gpibn @ alpha . linkserve . com

(ISSN 1119-4626)

Printed in Nigeria by ELCROF PUBLICITY, 12 Bassey Duke Street, P. O. Box 1267, Calabar..

The International Women's Health Coalition (IWHC) provided the financial support for the research and publication of this pamphlet.

PREFACE

Culture And Adolescents' Concerns on Sexuality is presented in four volumes:

Volume One: ASSERTIVENESS

Volume Two: SELF IDENTITY

Volume Three: BODY IMAGE

Volume Four: SELF ESTEEM

This is the third volume, on Body Image

In our society particularly among the rural poor and urban slum dwellers, as soon as a girl has reached the age of fifteen, she is put under severe pressure to find a husband. This socially constructed "need" now becomes a major focus. She intensifies the practice she has been socialised in, adorning herself and rubbing all kinds of chemicals on her body to become marketable. This reinforces her belief that her body is not presentable and that, may be, that is why she has not found a husband. Secondly, she loses self-confidence and rates herself low because she feels that she is failing to achieve the "ultimate" for all girls in life - marriage.

This "self-marketing" consciousness has been created from birth by actions, practices, norms from the family and the larger society through the teaching and learning of what is considered "beautiful" as applied to girls and women, and what to do to become a "marketable product" at maturity. She has learned that she is "marketable" if she is fair in complexion, tall, slim/thin, with pointed nose and with straight smooth legs. She starts to diet in order to be slim, and to bleach to

become fair in complexion. She does all these without the correct information on the attendant dangers. She hates her nose because it is not pointed. Of course she does not have the information on hereditary body characteristics. She wears long flowing gowns to hide her legs that she believes are not straight and smooth enough. She might, of course, have preferred to wear other things.

This publication BODY IMAGE addresses this problem: a situation where culture and tradition have been used to dehumanise millions of girls in our society through gender prejudices and social expectations that give negative messages about their bodies. The publication has been put together to assist girls in particular to realise that the way they are and look, is natural and unique to them. Each person is special, unique and different. Bodies come in different shapes and sizes - tall, short, dark, fair, thin, plump, straight, round etc. Some have deformities or disabilities not necessarily of their own making. Most importantly, everyone has the right to choose her/his profession, and his/her way of life. What young people need as they grow up is the correct information about body hygiene, how to maintain their bodies in health and life management skills to live meaningful lives, whether married or not.

BENE E. MADUNAGU

Chairperson

Executive Board

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This publication has benefited from the imput of all the GPI girls - the three sets of GPI graduates and the present members - the contribution of our colleagues in the South West zone, the work of the editorial committee that pulled together the various outputs from the girls. The committee was made up of Diana Ibok as Secretary, Assumpta Ekpenyong, Imoh Bernard, Victoria Edet and Eka Bassey. Imoh Bernard further reviewed the committee work, while Inyene Regan Emah typed the manuscripts. I express my profound thanks to all of them and to other staff who made various other contributions to the work.

BENE E. MADUNAGU

BODY IMAGE

INTRODUCTION

An understanding of the concept of "BODY IMAGE" is an important factor in appreciating and being contented and proud of one's body structure and therefore valueing oneself.

For many girls, negative comments they receive from parents, teachers, peer group about their body parts tend to affect the way they see their bodies. Examples of such messages are "see your broad nose like that of a cow", "see your short legs, "your neck is like that of an ostrich. During growing-up, these negative comments result in negative thoughts about one's body parts, and create low perception about oneself.

Some girls end up disliking themselves, others are not proud of the way they look. They condemn their looks after comparing themselves to those of their friends. A large number of girls are afraid to take pictures or even look at themselves in a mirror for fear of seeing their 'ugly' body parts.

Human bodies come in different sizes and shapes. This makes each of us 'unique' When a person is described as being too dark in complexion, he/she resorts to using chemicals to make the skin lighter. If one has natural brown hair, he/she uses chemical to turn the hair dark.

What is body image?

Body image is the mental picture that an individual has about himself/herself. It is the way we see our body parts. How do you

see your body? A GPI girl Imabong, 17 years, speaks:

"Before I joined GPI, I used to be very shy to talk in the public because of my bulky eyes and long tiny legs. I kept on blaming God for creating me with such structures, not until I learned in GPI about my body image. To me the session was an interesting one. The facilitator used different methods to make me discover that I should like my body and that I am unique and different. I also learned that people who complain or get worried about their long tiny legs, like me, could wear full length cloths if they choose and feel good with themselves.

At the end of the session, my attitude about the parts of my body changed. I developed special liking for all the parts of my body including those parts I used to hate most.

Before then my brother was fond of nagging me. He called me man-structure and said all the food I eat in the house were all stored in my bones. I used to feel so bad about it.

After the session on body image. I felt relieved of shyness and negative thoughts towards my body image. When I got home that day I educated my brother on the issue.

I told him that I am proud of all the parts of my body beginning from my head to my toes. I told him that the so called tiny legs, slender body and others he framed against me are no longer enough to make me feel bad. I now know better and I feel very comfortable with myself. I added that I have learnt to appreciate and admire my body parts so that others can also like them. I educated him by telling him that just because I have these long tiny legs, is not reflected in my intelligence and capabilities.

I told him that some people go on dieting to look the way I am. Above all, I told him that I am a unique person because there is no one else like me ——"

Another girl also shared her experience after the session on body image thus: That in her school during a conversation with some friends, she was told by another girl that she had a "bogus" shape which did not make her as beautiful as she ought to be, hence she should "check" her weight to enable her get "figure 8" that is, slim fit. The GPI girl said she used that opportunity to educate her ignorant peers and friends that her shape does not determine whether or not she is beautiful or intelligent. She said she educated them on body image, explaining that the mental picture of one's self is called body image. "Hence a beautiful person is she or he who thinks, feels, sees and believes she or he is special, unique, different irrespective of his or her beauty, height, shape or colour".

After having received lessons on "body image, during review exercise to evaluate their understanding of the concept, the facilitator asked the girls to list 5 things they liked about themselves. Interestingly, Mfonobong, 14 years old, wrote thus:

"I like everything about myself
I like everything about myself
I like everything about myself
I like everything about myself
I like everything about myself"

and Tina 13 years old wrote; ".....my complexion

Black is beautiful...."

It is important to know that body image is not just our physical characteristics but also comprises of our talents, feelings and emotions. Positive image of one's body is essential to develop high self esteem. Everybody has her /his own physical body built. The way one feels about one's body will affect the way others feel about them too. So instead of feeling negative or saying negative things about your body parts, try saying something appreciative to each of those parts. There is nothing you should regret about your body. If you condemn your body what then do you want or expect other people to do? Being you is what makes you unique. Nobody in this world has the same body structure like you. Body image is subject to change through illness, accidents, disabilities and even during the normal biological function of pregnancy. So appreciate and have positive thoughts about your body parts!

How do we identify and evaluate societal messages about girls and women's bodies and their appearances?

Our society generally believes that;

1. A beautiful woman must not be deformed .
2. A muscular girl has a male structure and is not "ladylike"
3. Girls with big breast and tiny legs are referred to as "improper fraction" (i.e. $^4/_3$)
4. Girls with flat buttocks and big breasts are not considered beautiful.
5. A beautiful woman should have pointed nose, round face and

round red lips.

6. A beautiful woman should have straight legs, pointed breasts, big round buttocks and long hair.

7. A beautiful woman should be fair in complexion, and so on. Such myths and prejudices show ignorance about the biology of inheritance.

These are some of the mixed messages that assail adolescent girls in our communities. The media (print e.g newspapers and electronic e.g TV, radio) reinforce such myths. The media plays a significant role in making us criticise our bodies because often advertisements portray women as slim, fair, beautiful person. Those who do not fit this description are forced to develop negative ideas about themselves.

Women who feel bad about some or all parts of their bodies often allow themselves to be pressured into doing or causing harm to their bodies in the name of "beauty". Men and women also subject themselves to all kinds of violence in the attempt to fit social prescriptions. Here are some examples:

1. **Bleaching**: The use of skin lightening creams and soap, peels the outer layer of the skin and lightens it gradually. The skin becomes weaker and no longer serves as a filter to the sun rays against excess heat. The skin without defence is exposed to ulcers and skin cancers. Inability to afford cost of such creams and soap causes unsightly patches on the body. Bleaching also leads to inability for stitching wounds and for wound to heal after operation. Premature aging is also one consequence of bleaching.

2. **Perming**: Creams and gels contain harsh corrosive chemicals.

These chemicals can cause;

- Skin and scalp burn.
- Hair loss.
- Premature greying of the hair.

3. **Dieting:** This can lead to various forms of health complications depending on the person's constitution.

Dieting is a chronic cause of stress in women. Stress is one of the most serious medical risk factors which lowers the effectiveness of the immune system and contributes to high blood pressure, heart disease and high mortality rates .

The following story of gardener and the tree: is put here to illustrate the need to be satisfied with our body image and take care of our bodies.

Once upon a time, there was a gardener who loved small trees. He did not like trees that were tall and full - only small and dainty ones. He planted a variety of them in his grove.

One year he noticed a young tree coming up that he had not planted. The leaves of the tree had nice almond shape and its trunk had a nice texture and lovely colouring, so he decided to let it stay.

The tree grew, and the gardener became unhappy because it was not small like the others but had a large trunk and full branches. So he decided that he would make this tree small like the others.

First he chopped off its long and bushy branches and cut its

trunk to a shorter height. Then he stopped giving it water as regularly as he did the other trees. He built a shade around it so that it would not get so much sun. He believed that if he held back nourishment, the tree would stop growing and become small and dainty like the other trees in his garden.

Gradually the tree stopped growing, but instead of becoming a small, dainty tree, it became a large tree that never grew. Its trunk was full and ready to support many branches, but they had all been cut off. The sparse new growth it had managed to generate without proper sun and water was unhealthy.

One day when the gardener stopped by, he saw that the bark had lost its lovely colouring and the leaves had become thin and curled.

The trunk that had been large and tall now looked ugly with the shorter height. The gardener shook his head sadly and said "what have I done"? instead of the tree I wanted, I have ruined the tree I had".

You may find yourself in the gardener's situation if you insist on changing your body parts by applying chemicals and doing other harmful things to yourself as mentioned above.

As mentioned earlier, our bodies come in different shapes and sizes. Human anatomy or structure differ from one to another. But each person male or female is equally special. It is the differences that make us unique.

Our bodies change from the moment we are born and keep on changing all through our lives. This is because every thing that is alive grows and changes. The many changes that take place in

our bodies are caused by hormones, and are natural body processes.

FACTORS THAT MAKE US DEVELOP NEGATIVE BODY IMAGE

1. **The media**: - A lot of money and energy is constantly being put into advertising "body beautifying products" and they do a good job of making us dislike our bodies as they are. They portray beautiful people as slim tall and fair in complexion but most of us do not fit these images. We often get pressured into disliking ourselves. We should be aware of the effect that constant advertising has on us. Always look critically at media advertisements. Pick what will enhance your health and not will change your natural appearance.

2. **Feeling judged by the other sex:** Bodies grow and change during puberty. There is also a heightened awareness of the opposite sex during this period, boys and girls do a lot of looking and judging each other's bodies. It is important to note that the size and shape of a person's body parts do not affect the person's productive ability or the ability to be good, resourceful and intelligent.

3. **Feeling judged by friends**: The friends you move around will often have a certain idea about what looks good. Young people often feel pressured into wanting to look the way their friends and peers do or say they should.

4. **Comparing yourself with others:** We live in a very competitive world. Society places emphasis on competition between countries, companies, people, friends and even in the family, so it is not surprising that we feel competitive. Competition is positive and enhances progress but it could turn unhealthy when used to change our body parts.

5. **Feeling judged by your parents**: - Parents often find it difficult to accept their children the way they are. Your parents may want you to look a certain way. They often feel "it is for your own good" They may be right sometimes when body hygiene is the motive but sometimes they have other reasons from social myths that they do not necessarily know the outcome. They may feel they are judged by their friends and community according to how the children look or they may remember their own adolescent years. Developing a positive self image can help us make good decisions for ourselves and make us more likeable and attractive to ourselves and to others. Physical attractiveness should not be a major factor in choosing friends. Disabled people also have the same feelings, desires and needs as people without disabilities. Everyone has the right to be loved and appreciated inspite of body looks provided the body is kept clean and healthy.

TIPS ON HOW TO IMPROVE YOUR BODY IMAGE

- Learn more about the functions of your body to appreciate the importance of your body.
- Look and admire yourself in the mirror always in your resting time.

- Eat nutritious foods for healthy body and maintain personal hygiene.
- Learn to challenge those who judge your body e.g. if a person tells you, 'see your fat nose' with the intention to make you feel bad, you could answer, "having a fat nose does not make me an unintelligent girl/boy."
- Keep your body clean by washing with mild soap and water at least twice daily.
- Treat yourself with care and tenderness and love every part of your body.
- Form or join organisations that promote self acceptance and self-esteem and are involved in development issues social justice and antisexism.
- Pick friends who like you just for being yourself . Real friends would not ask you to do things that may hurt you.
- Take charge of your feelings. Don't let others tell you who you are. Be strong and remember that you are unique. No matter what others say, you are special because you are different. Remember that everyone else around is also different.
- Accept your body as it is. Every person's body goes through changes. Everyone is differently abled.

CONCLUSION

The way our bodies look is determined through inheritance and genetic make-up of our parents and lineage.

Feeling negative about our physical selves is **wrong**. It is

good to know that you should not be scared of your body image. That part of your body which you are ashamed of, usually is what makes you unique. Therefore, each person should be proud of the special qualities of her/his body.

Furthermore, as one grows up, body changes occur from birth through puberty and adult stage. Good health or eating habits such as cleanliness and exercises can improve the way a person looks and feels. Personal hygiene is also important to maintain one's body in health.

Remember, as you are complaining about these various parts of your body, some people out there do not have them. It is wrong to wish to be in another person's shoes. It is good to note that, people develop at different paces because they are different and the differences make them unique. The way a body looks (skin, colour, hair, eye, shape) is mainly determined by a person's parents and grandparents. Environment and health habits also play an important role. Peoples' image of their bodies often affect their feelings and behaviours.

We spend a lot of time, money and energy trying to make ourselves look different, to change our looks, exercise, diet to lose weight, try to gain weight, set our hair, wear make ups, buy nice clothes, even go for plastic surgery. Developing a positive body image can help us make good decision for ourselves and make us more likeable and attractive to others.

ACTIVITY 1

DISCOVERING YOURSELF EXERCISE

Fill the blank spaces with as many endings as possible:

1. The physical features I appreciate in myself are .....
2. I am talented in.....
3. What others have told me that they admire about me are .....
4. I am proud of .....
5. Ways I take care of myself are .....

ACTIVITY II

Writing exercise

1. List the things women do to look beautiful.
2. What reason do they have for doing these?
3. Do you still think these are necessary? Why or why not?

ACTIVITY III

1. Agree/disagree exercise

* Lip suction
* Perming
* Lipstick
* Sexy bra
* Perfume

* Plastic surgery
* Sexy night gown
* Make-up
* Vaginal deodorants
* Wig
* Weavon
* Body cream
* Bleaching soap and cream
* Dying of hair
* Wearing high heeled shoes
* Nail polish
* Face powder

Tabulate the following into their right columns; Column I - The things women do that affects their health;- Column II those that do not affect their health are:-

GLOSSARY

Unique:-	To be the only one of its kind, i.e. having none like it
Implore:-	To beg earnestly
Childhood:-	Period of being a child
Disability:-	To be permanently, physically and mentally incapable
Artificial:-	Not natural i.e. to imitate nature, human - made.
Conversation:-	Talking or communicating with another
Ignorant:-	Lacking knowledge
Peers:-	Group of people of the same age range and common activities e.g small / class mates.
Societal:-	Organised and interdependent community norms

Deformed:-	Misshapen, mishaped, could result from accident, defects.
Assail: -	Overwhelm
Gardener:-	Person whose job is growing flowers, fruits or vegetables
Dainty:-	A thing to be delicately pretty or small
Texture:-	Feeling or appearance and arrangement of constituent parts of an object.
Anatomy:-	Science of animal or plant structure or external features.
Adolescents:-	Person between childhood and adulthood, aged 10 to 19 years.
Strive: -	To try hard.
Ugly:-	Unpleasant to the eye, ear, or mind
Portray:-	Make a likeness of something by describing in words
Paces:-	Single step in walking or running
Criticise:-	To find fault with something or someone
Complexion:-	Natural colour, texture and appearance of the skin of someone or object.
Contented:-	State of satisfaction
Ulcers:-	Open sore on or in the body often forming pus
Defence:-	Means of protection

GPI TEAM

National

Bene E. Madunagu	-	*Chairperson Executive Board*
Assumpta Ekpenyong	-	*Programme Officer*
Kunle Akisanya	-	*Accountant*
Grace Osakue	-	*Member, Executive Board*

South West

Grace Osakue	-	*Coordinator*
Leo Igunbor	-	*Office Manager*
Fatima Ikoghode	-	*Facilitator*
Abies Lawani	-	*Facilitator*
Iyen - Oghogho Ohonba	-	*Facilitator*
Nkiru Ndukuba	-	*Research Assistant*
Ese Amadasun	-	*Computer Operator*
Patience Ojeigbo	-	*'Typist*
Ify Nnaneme	-	*Library Assistant*
Scholastica Aihumekeokhai	-	*Accounting Assistant*
Austin Uzorma	-	*Night Watchman*
Musa Sunday	-	Night Watchman

South East

Bene E. Madunagu	-	*Co-ordinator*
Paul Johnson	-	*Office Manager*
Ofonasaha Ekpoudom	-	*Personal Assistant/Facilitator*
Eka Bassey	-	*Senior Facilitator*
Imoh Patrick Bernard	-	*Facilitator I*
Victoria Effiom Edet	-	*Facilitator II*
Caroline Nelson Edom	-	*Facilitator*
Owoidoho Okon Utak	-	*Accounting Assist. /Facilitator*
Felicia Eteanwan Eso	-	*Facilitator*
Diana Isaac Ibok	-	*Reseach Asst./Facilitator*
Iquo Etim Nkuda	-	*Accounting Asst./Facilitator*
Arit Etim Okon	-	*Secretarial Assistant*
Iyene Regan Emah	-	*Computer Operator*
Maris Idowu Arabu	-	*Computer Operator*
James Eni Ibor	-	*Operations and Security Officer*
Ubong Ekon Andy	-	*Operations and Security Officer*
Margaret Afangideh	-	*Library Assistant*