

# Women's Social, Sexual Rights Remain a Concern for Southern Nigeria

By Lisa Bryant

**T**he status of women's rights in Nigeria has been a topic of international concern in recent years, as Islamic courts have sentenced several women to death for adultery. Much of the focus has centered on Nigeria's largely Muslim North, where a dozen states adopted strict Islamic Sharia law four years ago. During a recent week-long trip across Nigeria, Paris-based reporter Lisa Bryant found women's social and sexual rights are also an issue in the largely Christian South.

It is Sunday afternoon, but that doesn't mean it's a day off for teachers and students at Girls' Power Initiative, a nonprofit organisation in the southeastern Nigerian city of Calabar.

The topic of this class is feminism, and—over sounds of noise from the street filtering in from the street below—instructor Ofonasa Ekpoudom wants to know what her class thinks about the word.

Ms. Ekpoudom asks the class: "Have you seen the word before? Or seen or heard people discussing it? What does it mean to you? When you hear the word 'feminism' what comes into your mind?"

Hands rise, and the teenage girls in Ms. Ekpoudom's class offer definitions—right and wrong—of what the word feminism means. In the end, they conclude that it refers to support for women's rights, by both women and men.

Teaching these young adolescents about their social and sexual rights is what Girls' Power Initiative is all about.

Founded in 1993, Girls' Power now works in four southern and central Nigerian states. About 1,500 girls are enrolled in its four-year programme, and thousands

more have listened to Girls' Power instructors lecture at participating schools.

Drugs, safe sex, HIV-AIDS, no topic is too sensitive for these Nigerian adolescents, caught between conservative customs preached at home and the pressures of their streetwise, Internet-connected generation. Girls' Power chairwoman Bene Madunagu says the common theme in those diverse subjects is that the girls have rights.

"If we take the young people at the adolescent state, where they are still groping—[and asking themselves] who am I? Who am I going to be? What is happening to me and giving them the right messages and the right orientation to understand that they have the capacity to achieve what they want to achieve and let them see the barriers to that achievement, those girls will grow up empowered," she said. "And their children therefore will be empowered."

A leading Nigerian feminist and university professor, Mrs.

Madunagu was a leader of Women in Nigeria, a national women's rights movement. But she quit to launch Girls' Power, convinced that women's legal and sexual rights must be taught early on.

Around Calabar, the Girls' Power Initiative—known locally as GPI—has the reputation of fostering assertive young women. But Girls' Power students like 21-year-old Enoidem Ekoriko say not everybody likes that idea, especially not young men.

"Before GPI was here in town, they had this stereotype that this world is a man's world, that they are the only ones that have a say in the society," said Enoidem Ekoriko. "So they were kind of oppressing the women. But now GPI has opened their eyes that we have the right to make our own decisions about what happens or does not happen to you. [So] they are kind of angry with the organisation."

Figuring out the state of women's rights in Nigeria—Africa's most populous country—is no easy matter. Nigeria

made international news after Sharia courts in the largely Muslim North sentenced several women to death by stoning for adultery. But none of the sentences has been carried out, and some have been overturned by a religious appeals court.

And in spite of tough Islamic codes in the north, educated women also sit in state governments there, and work in major corporations. In addition, although the largely Christian south generally grants women greater rights, in many areas, like Calabar, southern women face some of the same problems as women in the north. Those include unsafe abortions, being forced into early marriages and having their futures decided in part by bride prices.

Activists say those practices treat women as a commodity, and emphasise the power of men to control their lives. Indeed, one of the most serious violations of women's rights—genital mutilation, also known as female circumcision—is more prevalent in Nigeria's south than in the north.

In Lagos, the non-profit organisation Pathfinder International

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works on health and development issues. Its deputy country director for Nigeria, Bisi Tugbobo, says the struggle for greater rights is an issue facing just about every Nigerian woman.

"If you look at our culture, we have been controlled by men," she said. "So no matter what your education is—unless you're a woman activist—you don't have a place in Nigeria. Because you are a woman, you're supposed to be seen and not heard. Even in the south. In the south it's better, because you can talk to your husband, negotiate. But a lot depends on getting approval from your husband."

Nigeria's fitful progress toward greater women's rights mirrors countries elsewhere in Africa. Women have been appointed to top govern-

ment posts in countries like Senegal, Uganda, Zambia and Sao Tome and Principe. At the same time, several African countries rank at the bottom of a recent United Nations world survey on girls' access to primary education.

What is changing in Nigeria is that women's rights are becoming a subject of national debate.

This is the theme song of a television programme called Today's Woman, on which women's concerns are discussed. The programme recently featured a discussion of wife beating.

And there are groups like the Adolescent Health and Information Programs, based in the northern Muslim state of Kano. The group teaches local young people about health and sexuality is-

ues and it also encourages young men and women to go to university and learn trades. It even encouraged 18-year-old Habibah Akindele to play on the women's basketball team for Kano State.

"It's my pride, being a girl playing basketball," said Habibah Akindele. "I'm very happy about it. And people are supporting me."

Indeed, Mairo Bello, head of the programme for adolescents in Kano State, says despite the furor over Sharia law, northern women there have more rights than they did a decade ago.

Way down south in Calabar, Bene Madunagu of Girls' Power agrees. She gives the example of her own Girls' Power students. She says many have gone on to earn university degrees or other higher educational diplomas. Ms. Madunagu says the young women of Nigeria's new generation have dreams, and many of them are on their way to fulfilling them.

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