



Learners speaking with the First Lady, Madam Monica Geingos after the launch of the #BeFree Movement in Ohangwena Region. UNFPA

First Lady takes #BeFree Movement to Ohangwena and Omusati Regions

Omusati/Ohangwena, June: The First Lady of the Republic of Namibia (FLON), Madam Monica Geingos on 1 and 3 June 2018 launched the #BeFree Movement in Omusati and Ohangwena Regions respectively. The events included panel discussions with young people on the challenges they face. The discussions aimed to empower them with information to be the masters of their destiny.

The #BeFree Movement was launched by FLON in November 2016 with the assistance of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS). #BeFree was inspired by the UNAIDS drive to ensure an AIDS-free generation by 2020 through the Start Free, Stay Free, AIDS Free initiative.

While HIV remains a centre piece of this advocacy initiative, the purpose of #BeFree in Namibia is to create a non-judgmental, inclusive platform which encourages honest and robust dialogue. It also encourages information sharing on matters which stand in the way of young people being free of the issues that inhibit their development, such as drug addiction, teenage pregnancy, psychosocial issues such as suicide, and poor relationships with parents/caregivers.

The events attracted about 1,500 young people and service providers and were graced by the presence of Hon. Usko Nghaamwa, Governor of the Ohangwena Region, a representative of the Queen of Oukwanyama, regional and local authority councillors, and participating school teachers, parents, health professions and business personalities.

In the discussions, topics such as sexual and physical abuse, teenage pregnancy, high school attrition rates, alcohol and drug abuse, and lack of parental engagement were debated by learners, experts and professionals who all displayed a profound desire to find tangible solutions to the problems facing the adolescents and young people. The use of debate, role play, panel discussion, as well as testimonies from young inmates in the Oluno Correctional Facility set the scene for an interactive dialogue between FLON and the young people from the two regions.

One inmate related how her pregnancy led to the rejection and hostility from the baby's father. This resulted in hurt and anger and eventually giving birth in a toilet and terminating

the life of her full term baby with a pair of scissors to the head. She narrated the difficulty of serving time and the trauma of remembering the cry of her baby every day.

A community police officer on the panel highlighted how often crimes are covered up due to cultural norms which make people feel ashamed or reluctant to report. Madam Geingos suggested that a system should be put in place so that all underage children who fall pregnant automatically open a statutory rape case. "A child pregnancy under the age of 16 is not teenage pregnancy, but rape," Geingos stressed, urging health workers to start reporting such cases to the police.

The law on statutory rape states that it is illegal for adults to engage in sexual activity with minors under the age of 16, regardless of consent.

Having visited 12 regions with the #BeFree Movement, the FLON has identified parental or guardian involvement in the lives of young people as a common threat that young people have identified as a source of many of their problems, as well as the lack of services and information curtailed to their needs. A young boy at the event asked FLON, "What are the plans of the government to bring services closer to us?"

UNFPA Representative Dennia Gayle, who traveled with FLON and participated in the dialogues with the young people, shared how insightful the events have been. "We have heard you. The discussions will help shape UNFPA's support to the Government of Namibia in its quest to make the right investments in young people's development as part of its aspiration to eradicate poverty", she assured participants.