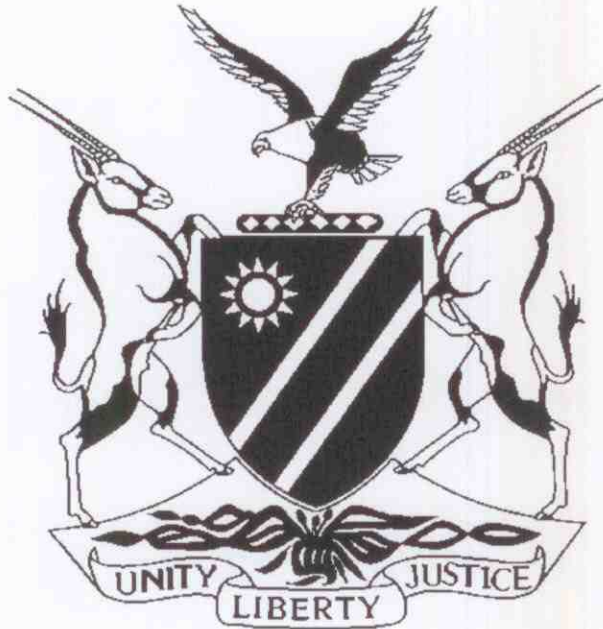


REPUBLIC OF NAMIBIA



**STATEMENT BY MADAM PENEHUPIFO
POHAMBIA, FIRST LADY OF THE REPUBLIC OF
NAMIBIA ON THE OCCASION OF THE 15TH
HIV/AIDS AWARENESS CAMPAIGN AT
POLYTECHNIC OF NAMIBIA**

18 MAY 2011

WINDHOEK

Check Against Delivery

Director of Ceremonies
Dr. Tjama Tjivikua, Rector of the Polytechnic of Namibia
Esteem Management Members of Polytechnic of Namibia
Members of Staff
Distinguished invited Guests
Dear Partners in the fight against HIV/AIDS
Distinguished Learners and Students
Members of the Media
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I wish to express my deep appreciation to the Management of the Polytechnic of Namibia for convening this important event on HIV/AIDS. It is particularly important that we are meeting to exchange information on strategies needed for the effective campaign against the AIDS pandemic. The students at this institution, and indeed at other schools and colleges, are an important resource for development. The youth are the future of any nation. They need an upbringing that is based on social values that promote morality and patriotism to their country.

They therefore need to be nurtured into responsible citizenship.

As we meet to discuss one of the most topical issues of our time, it is fitting that we are doing so with the youth. In this era of the AIDS pandemic, our youth need to know more about this disease so that they can protect themselves from being infected. It is therefore important that the young people should be the main focus of the AIDS prevention programmes because they are the most vulnerable group in terms of knowledge, resources and capacity to manage their own lives. I sincerely believe that the annual HIV/AIDS awareness campaign serves as a useful forum for disseminating information to society at large. As parents and educators, we must leave no stone unturned in spearheading the public awareness campaign on this subject. I am greatly honoured and wish to take this opportunity, once again, to thank the Polytechnic of Namibia for inviting me to this extremely important event.

Director of Ceremonies,

Statistics compiled by the UNAIDS Secretariat and the World Health Organization (WHO) in their 2010 Report on the Global AIDS Epidemic¹ indicate that Sub-Saharan Africa is the worst affected region in the world in terms of HIV infections. This is demonstrated by the fact that in the past two decades, 22 million people worldwide have died from AIDS related illnesses and that out of these, 17 million were in Africa. It is alarming and worrisome that although Africa constitutes less than 11 percent of the total global population, the continent has more than 70 percent of all HIV/AIDS related cases in the world. This situation is unacceptable and therefore presents a compelling call to action.

It is a fact that the highest prevalence rate is the age group 15 to 49, the most productive age group. This situation is having an adverse effect on the economies of many African countries as we are losing some of our well-trained human resources at an alarming rate. Among these are our medical personnel in various areas, teachers, engineers, economists, and managers of many different businesses – both public and private. Leaders in different spheres of society are equally infected and affected.

Fellow Namibians, the statistics I have just alluded, to attest to the fact that we are living in profoundly troubling times that call for radical ways of dealing with the most devastating health crisis of our time. It is therefore imperative that in view of the threat that AIDS poses to the survival of the human race, especially here in Africa, all of us in Africa and the international community should view the HIV/AIDS pandemic as an emergency requiring urgent and exceptional measures. Indeed the political will of our leaders in this crusade, coupled with the right action can make a tremendous difference in our public awareness campaign.

Director of Ceremonies
Fellow Participants,

As part of preventive measures, I personally became involved and launched a campaign on the Prevention of Mother-to-child Transmission (PMTCT) on 14 March 2011 this year at the Katutura State Hospital. Evidence shows that male involvement in PMTCT has positive implications for reducing the stigma, improving partners HIV testing, and increased uptake of anti-retroviral therapy as well as improving infant feeding. Through male involvement in PMTCT, babies of HIV parents are born HIV free and live a healthy life.

The goal of the PMTCT programme is to reach zero (0 per cent) mother-to-child-transmission by 2015.ⁱⁱ In Namibia significant progress is being made to reduce the transmission of HIV from mother to child through PMTCT programmes. More than 90% of pregnant women are attending Antenatal Clinics (ANC) and accessing PMTCT services. The HIV transmission from mothers to their newborn children has reduced by almost 50 per cent in just two years from 13.4 per cent in 2006 to per cent in 2008/2009.ⁱⁱⁱ This indicates that almost one in every two parents in Namibia, who starts PMTCT services early, adheres to treatment and leads a healthy lifestyle, can give birth to an HIV-free baby. Latest research shows that further involvement in PMTCT helps HIV positive mothers to attend ANC, get tested earlier, improve adherence to PMTCT treatment regimens and adopt safer infant feeding options. Through male involvement, babies have a greater chance of being born HIV-free. The importance of male involvement to turn the tide on the AIDS pandemic cannot be overemphasized. Through your involvement as males, this ambitious goal that I just pointed out can be achieved. This brings me to another objective for this campaign that needs to be highlighted and that can complement male involvement for the eradication of HIV/AIDS in our community. I am talking about the empowerment of females to negotiate for safer sexual practices and to reduce multiple and concurrent partnerships in sexual relationships.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In her book: *"Women Empowerment and Demographic Processes,"* Anastacia Gage defines women empowerment as "... the ability of girls and women to exercise their sexual and reproductive rights..."^{iv} end of quote.

Dear students,

Let us for a moment pose the question: *"what are reproductive rights?"*. It has been conceived in various research studies as:

- the freedom to decide how many children to have and when to have them;
- the right to family planning information and services.

In recent years, this definition has been extended to include a woman's right to control her own body. According to Dixon- Mueller this right includes "...freedom from sexual violence, unwanted and exploitative sexual relations and unwanted medical interventions..."^v, just to mention a few. I would like to add to this definition that a woman's right to control her own body includes the freedom to choose one's sexual partner, to have knowledge over one's sexuality, to initiate or refuse sexual relations and to determine mutually, with one's partner, the frequency and form of sexual expression. However, little is known about woman empowerment on sexual reproductive health. But one cannot underestimate the impact of it in conquering the AIDS pandemic. We should take cognisance of the fact that culture plays a vital role in the empowering of women in our society and it will take a while to put women in a position to adopt safer sexual practices. I want to emphasize that Namibia is a young nation, can overcome this obstacle. We can enable our young women to hold themselves in more positive regard, encouraging them to hold higher educational and occupational goals, enabling them not only to become economically independent but empowering them on sexual reproductive health issues as well.

This is why the involvement of male in fighting this disease and assisting women cannot be overemphasized.

Dear Students,

This campaign aims to increase the knowledge and build the capacity of the student body to advance the professional lives of young people in Namibia while ensuring that they remain conscientious of their health and well-being; and that of society at large. As the saying goes, "*Knowledge is power*"; indeed the more you know the more you are able to protect and care for yourselves and your loved ones. And knowledge is the key to this campaign.

Director of Ceremonies,

I wish to commend the organisers of this very important awareness campaign. Our common objective should be the promotion of good health and sound well-being for all our young people. I remain grateful to the efforts of the Polytechnic, led by its visionary Rector and his able Dean of Students, to educate and empower our young students in the national fight against HIV/AIDS. Let us not underestimate the role of the youth and the importance of education. Therefore, I call on all learners and students here to maintain an active interest in and dedication to your studies. Equally, I urge you to take sincere care and exercise responsibility in your personal and social lives. Treat yourselves and your partners with the respect and dignity and care that you all deserve. Let us unite in our concerted efforts to eradicate this scourge from our society.

Director of Ceremonies

I also would like to urge every parent or guardian to educate and provide parental guidance to their little ones. In the same vein, both public and private institutions must join hands and resources to eliminate this virus from the face of the earth. Allow me to conclude my remarks by echoing the following wise words by the peace icon, and father of modern day India, Mahatma Gandhi on responsibility and change:

"Be the change you want to see in the world."

Let us crash the HIV/Aids!

I thank you.
