

CELEBRATING SAFELY: PROMOTING POSITIVE CONDUCT DURING BUGANU CEREMONY

This weekend, thousands and thousands of Lutsango and the general public from all walks of life will converge at Buhleni Royal Residence for the first leg of the Buganu Ceremony where Lutsango will be celebrating culture, tradition and the harvest of the marula fruit. As the nation prepares to join Their Majesties in rejoicing during this cherished traditional ceremony, it is essential to remember that with festivities come responsibility concerning health and behaviour in particular as relates to the fight against HIV and AIDS. By promoting good behaviour and awareness, we can ensure this festival remains joyous and safe for all participants.

The Marula Festival is a time to connect with our roots and embrace our cultural heritage. However, it's also an opportunity to remind ourselves and one another of the importance of health-conscious decision-making, especially given the ongoing challenges posed by HIV and AIDS in our beloved nation. Eswatini continues to work diligently towards reducing new infections, and each of us plays a critical role in achieving this goal.

The festival, renowned for its lively atmosphere and spirit of camaraderie, provides an excellent opportunity for individuals to foster a culture of respect and responsibility. As participants gear up to enjoy the event, it is essential to emphasize good behaviour that ensures a safe and enjoyable experience for everyone. Good behaviour extends beyond health precautions; it encompasses how we interact with and treat one another. Respect for personal boundaries and consent must remain paramount. As a nation, let us uplift and protect each other, ensuring that everyone feels safe and valued throughout the celebrations.

For families attending the festival, it's important to guide our young ones on responsible behaviour. Teach them about our cultural heritage and the significance of the Marula Festival, while also instilling in them the importance of making safe choices. Engaging the youth in cultural activities can also foster a sense of pride and responsibility, ensuring these traditions continue to flourish for generations to come.

Raising Awareness

The Marula Festival presents an invaluable platform for promoting HIV and AIDS awareness as it brings together large groups of people creating an opportunity to engage attendees in meaningful conversations about safe

practices. Through the support of NERCHA, Khulisa Umntfwana, an organization responsible for the traditional sector HIV response is responsible for raising awareness during the Marula Festival through conducting educational sessions.

Khulisa Umntfwana finds this platform useful and productive for conducting Social and Behaviour Change Campaigns focusing more on HIV and AIDS information dissemination to girls and women acknowledging the fact that women have been leading in the fight against HIV and AIDS. The campaign is also informed by the fact that adolescent girls and young women are the most vulnerable population groups to new HIV infections.

Therefore, the campaign will also encourage the participants to take control and protect themselves from risky behaviours. The campaign will also touch on elements of family planning and positive parenting. The parents will be empowered with positive parenting messages that promote the importance of showing love, warmth and kindness to children while guiding them towards desired behaviours versus using corporal punishment to correct undesired behaviours.

In the campaign Khulisa will utilize the services of 30 peer educators who will actively work in the Royal Residence with guidance and monitoring from Khulisa Umntfwana Officers. The 30 will be selected from their pool of already trained, self-motivated and experienced peer educators who have recently conducted sessions during the recent Umhlanga and Incwala SBCC Campaigns. They will be facilitating discussions on issues relating to AGYW with their peers during the course of the Marula Festival.

This year, the discussions will be facilitated throughout the weekend. Since the national event allows putting up of stalls, other organizations that provide health services and empowerment information have been invited to support the campaign by showcasing and providing their various health services and information on where they can be found beyond the event.

Khulisa Umntfwana will be working closely with the Ministry of Health whose various departments including the Sexual Reproductive Health Unit, which will have several mobile outlets offering a variety of services. The SRH unit will be offering services that include family planning, HIV prevention services and condom distribution. To improve condom uptake and usage, the SRH unit will bring a condomize mobile vehicle along with individuals who will be visible during the ceremony to distribute condoms.

To ensure that those on HIV treatment do not default, the ministry will avail ARVs for those who will forget their treatment at home and all they need to do is to visit their information stall.

Beyond the health services that will be availed during the ceremony, there will be information stalls that will be distributing IEC materials for Lutsango and the public to take home. As the nation celebrates during the festival, it is

encouraged that the prioritise prevention be it against HIV, sexually transmitted infections or unplanned pregnancy. HIV prevention services become key during the festival for a number of reasons:

- The ceremony attracts large gatherings leading to increased social interactions and potential risky behaviours.
- The Marula Festival sees many young people participate in the festivities, making it essential to promote safe practices to protect this vulnerable group from HIV transmission.
- Leveraging the cultural influence of traditional leaders and community figures can effectively promote HIV awareness and prevention.

As we gather under the vibrant Eswatini sun, let the Marula Festival serve as a reminder of our shared strength, resilience, and commitment to one another's well-being. By embracing good behaviour and fostering an environment of support and awareness, we not only honour our traditions but pave the way for a healthier future.

Here's to a joyous, safe, and meaningful festival for all.



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