René La Grange is a 24 year old gender based (GBV) and Early and Unintended Pregnancies (EUP) activist from Windhoek, Namibia. The title of this week’s piece is the name of her book, ‘You Deserve to be Loved’, that she is on the verge of completing and hopes to publish in 2022.

René believes that she has always been a gender equality warrior, recalling an incident when she was 15 years old, where she bravely went to the rescue of a young girl who she thought was being treated harshly by a relative. “The work that I have done in social services, community policing, as well as community outreach and engagement, has taught me that gender based violence affects both genders.” She calls this equal GBV. “Look, when I first started it seemed black and white. Then when you become involved and you look deeper towards the underlying issues, like cultural values, norms, past experiences, how a person was raised etc. all of which drive GBV, you realise that it’s really complex and there are no quick or easy answers.” She knows first-hand that people’s behaviour and attitudes are influenced by their life experiences and but does not believe in judging people at face value. “We try to be understanding and open to hearing both sides equally by using the LIVES 5 step approach to counselling in the case of GBV. These steps are the first line of support that is offered to a victim and perpetrator and include: L means listening to both parties equally and fairly, I is for inquiring about the needs and concerns of both parties, V looks at validating the stories and giving assurances where needed or asked, E is where you try to enhance the safety of both parties and finally S means offering support to both parties by connecting them with critical information, services and social support groups. René says that the Covid-19 pandemic skyrocketed the cases of GBV and early and unintended pregnancies, which saddens her as she believes that for a country with a population of less than 2.5 million it should not be experiencing the GBV or EUP (early or unintended pregnancies) that it is. “I want our leaders to step up and ensure that young girls and boys are safe in our country and that that they tackle the issues and complexities that lie at the heart of GBV. They have the power, the funds and the judiciary on their side. As activists we can play our part by continuing to push our leaders, engage with stakeholders in communities, as well as the police and community leaders and family elders to ensure that victims are not shamed or stigmatised and that this behaviour is not condoned, or explained away.” Moreover René believes that girls and young women need to own not condoned, or explained away. “This is what I want to change. This cycle of poverty that is perpetuated over and over. “This leads to reluctance in confronting bad behaviour as they are not willing to give these luxuries up.

Her activism, she says, was shaped by her unintended pregnancy when she was just 19. She had just completed her schooling and was looking forward to starting her new and exciting life that she had dreamed she would have. Those dreams were shattered when she found out she was pregnant and as abortion is illegal in Namibia, she had a choice to put her life in danger with a risky unsafe abortion or live with the pregnancy. Today her daughter of five lives with her mother who is raising her while René builds on her work in Windhoek. “I come from the Aawambo Tribe and they are very strict and harsh when it comes to things like early pregnancy.”
shares that in many instances the young girl is shunned from her family or is cast out to fend for herself. If she is lucky the father’s family might take in the child and care for it, but the young girl will have to take on menial jobs to try and pay for the care of her child, but as is most often the case she will end up having more and more children from different fathers, while trying to make ends meet. Her children who grow up without the necessary education or healthcare are themselves pushed into early marriages or menial jobs and suffer more poverty, suffering or even violence. And so the cycle of dependency, unequal opportunities and no avenues to change the outcome is perpetuated over and over. “This is what I want to change. This cycle of poverty and inequality.” She calls this the self-fulfilling prophecy, which has been coined locally as, “Parental Example of Permissiveness.” René believes that even if she is only able to save one life at a time, it’s one more girl child who is able to receive a proper education by completing her schooling, maybe even studying further. This means that, by continuing her education, she is now able to get a better job, so she is now able to support her siblings and can contribute towards household and schooling costs, thereby breaking the cycle to start a new one that paves the way for the next generation. Education combined with SRHR access and information is fundamental to taking the girl child out of the poverty cycle. This places power back in the hands of adolescent girls and young women.

For René, the biggest driver of change to end early pregnancies for the girl child will be ensuring that there is equal consequences for equal behaviour. “So, when a girl falls pregnant she is the one who has to drop out of school and take care of the baby. Her life is the one that is impacted because she misses out on school or just stops attending. The boy or young man continues his education. So his pathway to his future in unhindered.” What René is proposing, is that if a boy or young man who is still at school makes a girl pregnant, then he should also discontinue with his studies to look after the child. This way he shares the same harsh consequence that often comes with EUP. “When young boys have to have to share the same consequences, I believe you will see a massive drop in early or unintended pregnancies. If not behaviour and EUP rates won’t go down.” This would certainly set the cat amongst the pigeons and might just be the ‘catapult’ for change that is needed.

Using the experience from her own pregnancy, René has started a number of initiatives to help young girls who have discovered they are pregnant, to ensure they are given the necessary information on what to expect, where to go for services and how they can navigate their way forward. One of them is her YouTube series titled, TeenTactics that she plans to launch later this year. The aim being to talk directly to teenagers in a non-judgmental way, while offering encouragement, support and information for young girls who find themselves in the same position she did at 19. However, she is adamant that it’s the whole ecosystem that she wants to target, from young people, to their parents, religious leaders, government officials and community leaders and elders. Everyone needs to understand the role that they play in perpetuating the cycle of poverty and EUP or they can be part of the solution that builds inspires brighter and more prosperous futures for Namibia’s next generation.
For now though her focus is on setting up and building capacity for EUP at AfriYan Namibia. She wants to set up a programme that centered on human interest where shared experiences creates shared value. René hopes that this programme will create a movement focused on understanding, togetherness and shared accountability.

To learn more about René’s work or her upcoming book that she is hoping to have published, please follow her on:

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