

Speech by the Minister of Basic Education at the Annual Uyinene Mrwetyana Memorial Lecture

Kingswood College, Makhanda

Honoured guests,

Members of the Mrwetyana Family

Officials of the Uyinene Foundation,

esteemed educators,

Members of the media,

And most importantly, the young men and women gathered here today,

Good Morning

Let me begin by thanking Kingswood College for inviting me to deliver the annual Uyinene Mrwetyana Memorial Lecture. This event is not just to honour the memory of a remarkable young woman, whose life was taken far too soon, but also to reflect on what we do going forward to protect and empower women and children. In the words immortalized in rhythm and song by Michael Jackson, she was like a comet blazing across the evening sky, she was a rainbow fading in the twinkling of an eye, she indeed has gone too soon.

To the school, the Mrwetyana Family, the Uyinene Foundation and the partners who work together to preserve the memory of Uyinene, thank you for ensuring that although she was taken from so early, her memory continues to reverberate through space and time.

Uyinene was to all of us, a call to action—a moment to reflect on the unacceptably high levels of violence against women and children in our country and a moment to acknowledge that government failed her as it fails countless women and young children on a daily basis. She was also a moment for us to commit ourselves, as a society, to ensuring that every girl has the opportunity to live a life of safety and dignity and to thrive.

This week has been heavy for most. We have been made aware of children who have been sexually assaulted in their schools.

By adults who are meant to protect them.

This week I learnt of a young child - Cwecwe from eMatiela - not too far from here. This child was brutally violated and her perpetrators are yet to be found and prosecuted.

Schools are meant to be places of safety.

Places of learning.

Places where parents send their children to get an education and not be raped.

I know this particular case is receiving attention from the provincial government and the South Africa Police Service at a national level.

But these interventions are coming once unimaginable harm has been created.

Justice must be served. Yes.

But more must be done to rid our schools of sexual predators.

This is the important work I intend on doing with Minister Kubayi. To change the law so that every single person who comes into contact with children in schools is vetted against that register.

We cannot simply be angry.

We must let that anger fuel us into action.

As elected leaders, we must relentlessly pursue creating safe places for all our children.

We must do so using the law and the policies that we adopt.

However, I must be clear: the war against women and children in this country cannot be won by government interventions alone.

It has to be a whole of society approach.

But what we will not do is be quiet. Be shunned. We will stare this scourge down. Until we rid our country of those who believe they can outnumber us. Victimize us. Kill us. Kwanele mgoku.

The Power and Potential of the Girl Child

The story of young women in this country is one of resilience, brilliance, and triumph in the face of adversity. Our education system, particularly our National Senior Certificate (NSC) results, consistently tells us a powerful story: that girls in South Africa are excelling academically, often outperforming their male counterparts.

In the most recent matric results that I delivered on 13 January this year, young women made up the majority of Bachelor passes, proving once again that when given the opportunity, the girl child is more than capable of achieving excellence.

We see young women dominating in subjects like mathematics, science, and accounting—areas historically reserved for men. More young women than ever before are entering higher education, breaking barriers in law, engineering, medicine, and technology.

This is the South Africa that Uyinene believed in—a country where young women are not just participants in the national story, but authors of their own futures.

But even as we celebrate these achievements, we must confront a painful truth: while young women are excelling in classrooms, too many of them are being denied the future they have worked so hard to build.

Uyinene's Story: A Reflection of Our Crisis

Programme Director,

Uyinene's tragic death was not just an isolated act of violence. It was a painful reminder of the war being waged against women in this country every single day. South Africa has among the highest femicide rates in the world. Too many young women never get to walk across the graduation stage, enter the workplace, or pursue their dreams—not because they are not capable, but because their lives are stolen from them by men who feel they have a right to their bodies and indeed to their lives.

The death of Uyinene, and the deaths of countless other women like her, represent the lived reality of too many South African women.

Women who fear walking home alone. Women who enter public spaces with their hearts racing, wondering if they will make it home safely.

Women who are forced to modify their behaviour—not because they are doing anything wrong, but because the world around them has told them that their safety is a privilege, not a right.

Women who must change how they dress because they are told they provoke men to rape them.

Eliminate the Fear: A Call to Action

To the young women in this room today: I will not stand here and tell you that this world is fair. I will not pretend that the dangers you face are imaginary. But what I will tell you, with every conviction in my heart, is this: You must not let fear define you.

Yes, we live in a world where being a woman can feel like a risk. But we also live in a world where women are rising, where women are breaking barriers, where women are refusing to be silent, refusing to live in fear.

The theme of the 2024 annual report of the Uyinene Mrwetyana Foundation was “Eliminate the Fear”. This theme was most befitting because hers was not a story of fear. Her story is a rallying cry—a reminder that we, as women, cannot afford to shrink ourselves. If we step back, we allow those who seek to silence us to win. If we cower in fear, we give power to those who want to control us.

But if we stand tall—if we take up space, if we demand our right to exist safely, if we refuse to be erased—then we honour Uyinene, and we honour every woman whose life was stolen too soon.

So I say to you, as Zozibini Tunzi said, TAKE UP SPACE!!.

Step into classrooms and own your intelligence.

Step into boardrooms and claim your authority.

Take up space even if they say you are too ugly

Take up space even if they say you are too fat, too skinny, too loud, too quiet, too feminine, not feminine enough, take up space as you are.

Weaponized criticism, designed to control you, must never find you cowering. It must find you confident and fabulous.

Take up space and let the world feel your presence.

What Must We Do?

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As government, we have a duty to ensure that our policies and practices protect young women. We must strengthen GBV education in schools, creating safer learning environments, and we must work across sectors to tackle gender-based violence at its roots.

But this is not a fight for government alone. It is a fight for every South African. It is a fight for men to take responsibility and hold one another accountable. It is a fight for

institutions—schools, universities and workplaces—to create environments where women feel safe, respected, and valued. It is a fight for all of us to say: Not one more.

Conclusion: Go Boldly, Take Up Space

In closing, I want to remind the learners here today that you are capable, you are powerful, you are worthy as you are and you are here for a reason. Do not let fear hold you back. Do not let the dangers of this world dim your brilliance. Take up space and walk into rooms like you belong there—because you do. Speak up. Demand better. Challenge the world to be as fearless as you are.

Honour Uyinene, not just by remembering her, but by living your life fearlessly. We will not let her name be forgotten. We will not let her story be in vain.

So go boldly, young women of Kingswood College, Young women of South Africa. Go with the knowledge that you are the heartbeat of this nation. And never, ever stop making your mark.

Thank you.