**Position Paper**

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**Committee: Commission on the Status of Women**

**Country: Swaziland**

**The Issue**

Women and girls throughout the world face discrimination every day of their lives. Fighting against it is becoming slightly easier with the growing awareness to the issues deriving from gender inequality, but in undeveloped countries, women face a much steeper fight. It has been proven that they face shame, labour injustices and much more. The impact of gender inequality does not stop at women, but the entire population and consequently the world, as it has been proven with regards to sustainability, environmental concerns, politics, crime and poverty. Achieving gender equality, however, would have beneficial consequences in all those previously named categories as well as others, all over the world. In this paper, we will explore the current situation of women in Swaziland according to the following topics: women and sustainability, gender-based violence and women in education and employment. We will equally identify the problems, their possible solutions and the impact the implementation of those solutions could have on both women’s lives and society in Swaziland.

**The Country and Situation**

The Kingdom of Swaziland is a small country situated in South Africa. Politically, it is the last absolute monarchy remaining in the world. Its landscape is in the most part composed of hilly areas with some slopping plains. It has a legislative capital, Lobamba, and an administrative capital, Mbabane. Its population was approximately 1.25 million in 2013, where 63 percent being below the poverty line.

King Mswati III and the Parliament of Swaziland, in 2005, enacted The Constitution of the Kingdom of Swaziland Act 2005, where women’s rights are addressed in Chapter III, section 28, sub-section 1, where it is stated: “Women have the right to equal treatment with men and that right shall include equal opportunities in political, economic and social activities.” Furthermore, in the same section, under subsection 2 and 3, it is said: “Subject to the availability of resources, the Government shall provide facilities and opportunities necessary to enhance the welfare of women to enable them to realise their full potential and advancement.” And respectively, “A woman shall not be compelled to undergo or uphold any custom to which she is in conscience opposed.” Despite this, the country has not gone far enough in terms of the creation of solutions for difficulties faced by Swazi women in everyday life. King Mswati III has been reluctant to implement anything of the sort. In an article appearing in the Swaziland Vigil May 14th 2016, Nomcebo Ngwenya wrote: “Women in Swaziland still face horrendous, ill-treatment and inequality due to the fact that the patriarchal culture still practiced and promoted by the King and the government has the inequalities engrained in it, society still views women as subordinates to men.” Ngwenya isn’t the first to claim women are being held back by the King Mswati III’s patriarchal practices. In the Action for Southern Africa (ACTSA)’s June 2016 briefing paper, they state: “The reality is, despite pledges and commitments, women continue to suffer discrimination, are treated as inferior to men, and are denied rights. The King has demonstrated he is unwilling to change the status quo and promotes multiple aspects of the patriarchal society.” And later, “Laws of the Constitution, which came into effect in 2006, are not followed. The Constitution is recognised along with ‘Swazi law and custom’, passed down from generation to generation by oral tradition. This is not codified, leading to debate and inconsistencies within the already weak judicial system. Where ‘Swazi law and custom’ is incompatible with the Constitution, it should be deemed null and void. But in practice it continues to dictate the lives of women.” This contrast between rights belonging to women according to the Constitution and real life practice must have an end in order to achieve a healthier, more stable and better environment.

**Topic 1: Women and Sustainability**

Sustainable development has yet to be achieved in Swaziland and women play a large part in its success. However, gender inequality continues to impede Swazi women and natural disasters affects them disproportionately, impeding progress towards sustainability. In an article about rural poverty in Swaziland, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFTA) states: “Women are particularly vulnerable to poverty. Constitutionally, women can own and control land and their finances. However, traditional social systems discriminate severely against them and often bar them from owning and controlling land.”

In Swaziland, small-time agriculture is essential to food security. Land belongs to men and is passed down from father to son, which is a disadvantage to women. Although, more and more men leave to seek employment, for example, leaving women to run the entire household. In the same article by IFTA, it is said: “Households headed by women are growing in number, as men seek employment away from home and HIV/AIDS takes its toll. Women struggle to feed their families and meet household needs single-handedly. At present 20 per cent of households are headed by women, and a further 20 per cent are managed by women while adult males are employed away from home.”

In her 2014 thesis, Illinois University student Lauren Karplus did a case study on food security in Swaziland and identified solutions worth exploring: “The biggest challenges to food security, as perceived by food security practitioners, were the use of poor farming practices, land allocation policies, and a lack of government resources. None of these challenges is addressed by development interventions in Swaziland. This disconnect between what the development industry identified as problematic and what local food security practitioners believe emphasizes the undemocratic and “scientific” nature of development criticized by post-development theorists. Outside “experts” are responsible for addressing the problems that they identify without local involvement, and these experts then create interventions targeted at the Swazi population without regard for culturally appropriate solutions. Furthermore, development interventions were found to harm local, indigenous solutions to food security problems, which is another problematic aspect of development.”

As to menstrual waste, in an article appearing in the Swazi Observer on July 9th 2011, author Zanele Dlamini writes: “The ministry of health[of Swaziland] does not have a formal programme focusing on sanitary wear alone but the sexual and reproductive health unit does civic education on sexual and reproductive issues centre around the female organs and diseases relating to female reproductive issues.” The article explains that many Swazi women and girls practice unsanitary habits, such as washing their pads and reusing them or using unsuitable and potentially unhealthy materials as sanitary napkins, like toilet paper, newspaper or rugs. The document equally describes some health risks, the root of the problem, as well as identifies a possible solution that has proven its worth: “The problem of lack of use of proper sanitary wear and care still exists, especially in the rural areas and among those females who are living in a low socio-economic status who cannot afford to buy proper sanitary wear. As most people get educated on the issues of sexual and reproductive health and related feminine problems such topics have improved the use of improper sanitary wear.”

**Topic 2: Elimination of Gender-Based Violence**

According to ACTSA and Amnesty International, in 2010, 1 in 3 Swazi girls experience sexual violence before they reach the age of 18. Contraceptives are rare, marital rape is high, child marriage is widespread and 31% of women from the ages of 15 to 49 are HIV positive, which is more significant than men, who are only 20% HIV positive. Additionally, there are no laws yet to criminalize and punish marital rape. Yet, Swaziland has made many promises before, such as the creation of the Swaziland Commission on Human Rights and Public Administration (SCHRPA) and the signings of the Southern African Development Community Gender and Development Protocol in 2008 and the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). All these initiatives were deemed unsuccessful. In their June briefing, ACTSA says: “As a member of the Commonwealth (and so bound by the Commonwealth Charter), it [Swaziland] is also obliged to recognise gender equality and women’s empowerment as essential to human rights. Despite these commitments, Swaziland continues to seriously and persistently violate principles relating to the equal rights of women.”

Time for empty promises is over. Past solutions have not filled their mandate, it is essential to find new, improved solutions that will. A good start would be criminalizing marital rape (following the example the Swazi Government made a few years ago by revising the Child Protection and Welfare Act of 2012 and criminalising child marriage) and adding it to the Constitution under Chapter III, sections 14, 16, 18 or 28. The creation of women shelters supported by the government has been proven to be a positive initiative where women can feel safe. In UNICEF’S Annual Review in 2014, it is said: “Strategic advocacy and technical assistance by UNICEF resulted in the establishment of a fully operational One Stop Centre in the capital city for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence – the first of its kind in Swaziland. The potential for sustainability is evident from the Government ownership of all operational costs.” Other solutions worth exploring involve educating women and informing boys on moral issues form a young age to discourage and banish the notion of marital rape, forced marriage, dowry-related violence and more.

**Topic 3: Women in Education and Employment**

It is impossible to stress enough the importance of education. Some solutions for previously mentioned topics have had a direct link to educating Swazi women and girls. There are, however, significant barriers holding back progress.

School is expensive. It is often a luxury that poorer rural families are unable to afford. Yet, this is made worse for girls. Because their uniform is often composed of additional items, that extra cost adds itself to the total, making it less expensive to send a boy to school than a girl, in Swaziland. In an interview by the United Nations Girls’ Education Initiative with a Swazi school teacher, it’s said: “[…] the ‘hidden’ costs of schooling, such as school uniforms, also disproportionately affect girls. She says, “Girls seemingly have to pay more for uniforms because they have extras,” such as sports uniforms and tunics.” Other ‘barriers’ include traditions, certain belief systems and general poverty.

Solutions to the inequality between education for boys and girls must be triumphed over in order to solve multiple problems. Keeping girls in school has been proven to be directly linked to avoiding poverty, reducing the spread of diseases (for example, HIV), putting a stop to child pregnancies and so much more. In a documentary released on March 7th 2013 called Girl Rising, the stories of multiple inspiring girls from all over Africa are laced with statistics and facts about just how beneficial educating girls would be. To name a few, “A girl with one extra year of education can earn 20% more as an adult.” and “A child born to a literate mother is 50% more likely to survive past the age of five”.

An article about Swaziland appearing on [www.everyculture.com](http://www.everyculture.com) says as follows: “Sex-based stratification characterizes the workforce, though a few women hold important civil service positions.”

In the Decent Work Country Programme for Swaziland 2010-2014, signed by representatives from the International Labour Office (ILO) and representatives from the Government of Swaziland, says: "The gender dimension of labour shows that the majority of women and men worked as paid employees (65.8% and 79.2% respectively), whereas 29.6 % of women were self-employed compared to 16% of men."

In the same document, possible solutions were identified, such as "Carry out an employment diagnostic analysis to determine binding constraints and of course opportunities to ensure that growth is inclusive and job-rich with particular emphasis on women," and strengthening the labor inspection system.

**Conclusion**

The Kingdom of Swaziland has involved itself in many initiatives to combat gender inequality. However, their lack of success should not mean a halt. Swazi women are still ill-treated and deserve better. In this position paper, we have explored the current circumstances, as well as possible solutions to aid in terms of sustainability, the elimination of gender-based violence and in the domains of education and employment.