HIGH-LEVEL STATEMENT BY H.E THE RT. HONOURABLE PRIME MINISTER, RUSSELL MMISO DLAMINI | OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE 59TH PLENARY ASSEMBLY OF THE SADC PARLIAMENTARY FORUM | EZULWINI PALAZZO, KINGDOM OF ESWATINI | 21 NOVEMBER 2026

Theme: Harnessing Political Leadership, Progressive Culture and Data to Accelerate the Eradication of Child Marriage in the SADC Region

Your Excellencies Presiding Officers and Heads of Delegation from SADC Member Parliaments; Honourable Ministers, Presiding Officers and Members of both Houses of the Eswatini Parliament; Secretary General of the SADC Parliamentary Forum; Chairpersons of the Regional and National Women's Parliamentary Caucuses; Excellencies, Members of the Diplomatic Corps; Clerks and Secretaries General of Member Parliaments; representatives of young people, civil society, the private sector and development partners; ladies and gentlemen.

On behalf of His Majesty's Government and the people of the Kingdom of Eswatini, I extend to you a warm welcome to Ezulwini. We are honoured to host this distinguished Assembly, united by our commitment to the advancement of our region and the welfare of its people.

Our deliberations take place under a theme of profound significance: "Harnessing Political Leadership, Progressive Culture and Data to Accelerate the Eradication of Child Marriage in the SADC Region."

This theme calls upon us to bring public authority, community responsibility and sound evidence into common service. Political leadership must provide direction and resources; culture must uphold the dignity and protection of children; and reliable data must guide our interventions and hold us accountable for their results. The measure of our resolve will be found in the lives of the children whose futures we are gathered to protect.

Your Excellencies, Honourable Members,

Allow me, at the outset, to reaffirm the Kingdom of Eswatini's firm commitment to the transformation of the SADC Parliamentary Forum into a SADC Parliament. His Majesty King Mswati III has consistently supported this cause, recognising the contribution that a regional parliamentary institution can make to cooperation, accountable governance and the aspirations of our peoples.

The entry into force, in July 2024, of the Agreement amending the SADC Treaty provided the legal foundation for this transformation. We shall continue to work with fellow Member States to advance its implementation. We also convey our sincere appreciation to the Republic of Namibia for hosting the Forum and providing an enduring home for regional parliamentary cooperation.

Strong institutions require knowledge, foresight and capable leadership. It is in this spirit that Eswatini aspires to host the SADC University of Transformation: an institution through which the intellectual resources of our region may be directed towards our shared development challenges.

At the national level, our Parliament is pursuing the establishment of an Institute of Parliamentary Studies in collaboration with the University of Eswatini, to strengthen the capacity of Members and parliamentary officials to discharge their legislative, representative and oversight responsibilities. These endeavours reflect a common conviction: that the quality of our institutions depends upon the knowledge, competence and integrity of those entrusted to serve within them.

Your Excellencies, Honourable Members,

Ten years ago, here in Ezulwini, this Forum adopted the SADC Model Law on Eradicating Child Marriage. Our return to this subject must therefore be an occasion for honest examination. What protection has reached the child? What barriers remain? What must we now do with greater urgency and determination?

Child marriage violates the dignity and rights of children and compromises their health, education and prospects. Its consequences extend beyond the individual child, weakening families, perpetuating poverty and diminishing national development. No nation can regard its progress as complete while children are compelled to surrender their childhood and assume responsibilities for which they are neither prepared nor adequately protected. The eradication of child marriage is, accordingly, a legal responsibility, a moral imperative and a necessity for sustainable development.

In Eswatini, the protection of women and children is integral to the values through which we understand family, community and nationhood. The principle of *ubuntu* affirms that the welfare of a child concerns us all. It

places a duty upon those with authority, influence and means to protect those whose circumstances render them vulnerable.

We must give practical expression to that duty. Where hardship places a girl at risk of marriage, the response of the community must be to secure her education, support her household and ensure that she has access to protection and trusted assistance. Our responsibility extends equally to children already in marriage. They must be able to obtain protection, healthcare, legal assistance and opportunities to continue their education, without stigma or exclusion.

Your Excellencies,

Laws prohibiting child marriage are indispensable. Their effectiveness, however, depends upon our willingness to confront the circumstances that sustain the practice.

Poverty remains a powerful driver. A household facing severe deprivation may regard a daughter's marriage as a means of securing her future or relieving economic distress. Yet that decision may expose her to dependency, interrupted schooling, early pregnancy, violence and enduring disadvantage. Our response must therefore reach beyond the marriage itself to the conditions that make it appear necessary.

Social protection, access to quality education, livelihood opportunities and support for vulnerable families must form part of a coherent programme of prevention. A family should have a credible path through hardship that preserves the safety, dignity and future of its children. Keeping a girl in school requires more than a place in a classroom. It may require

assistance with essential costs, safe transport, protection from violence and support that enables her to remain in education when family circumstances become difficult. These are practical obligations through which public policy gives substance to the promise of equal opportunity.

Honourable Members, Ladies and Gentlemen,

We must also recognise the changing environment in which our children grow. Children encounter information, relationships and social pressures at increasingly early stages of their development. Parents, educators, community leaders and public institutions must be equipped to guide and protect them. Let us be unequivocal: physical development does not confer adulthood. It must never be mistaken for emotional maturity, legal capacity to marry or readiness to assume the obligations of marriage.

Material inducement, peer pressure and promises of financial security can expose adolescents to unequal and exploitative relationships. No adult may invoke a child's appearance, conduct or apparent willingness as justification for exploitation or unlawful conduct. The duty to respect the law and protect the child remains with the adult.

Early sexual activity, adolescent pregnancy and HIV vulnerability require a coordinated response through age-appropriate education, responsible parenting, accessible health services and effective protection against abuse. Every girl must grow in the assurance that her worth is inherent in her person, her dignity and her potential. Her future must never be reduced to the prospect of marriage.

Your Excellencies,

The rule of law requires clarity, consistency and effective enforcement. Our Constitution, the Children's Protection and Welfare Act of 2012, and the Sexual Offences and Domestic Violence Act of 2018 form essential parts of Eswatini's framework for the protection of children. We must continue the work of reviewing and harmonising the laws governing marriage, including older statutory provisions and their relationship with customary law, so that the protection afforded to every child is clear and consistent. Government reporting has itself recognised the need to address differences within the existing framework.

Our responsibility is twofold: to remedy deficiencies in the law and to give full effect to the protections already established. Legislation must be supported by capable institutions, accessible reporting mechanisms, timely investigation and effective remedies. Children and their families must know where assistance can be obtained, and they must have confidence that those entrusted with their protection will act.

Honourable Members,

The three pillars of our theme provide a clear framework for action. First, political leadership must translate commitment into delivery. The authority entrusted to us carries a corresponding duty to act. Legislative reform must be accompanied by adequate appropriations, functioning institutions and sustained parliamentary oversight. Our credibility will be determined by whether services reach vulnerable communities, whether protection systems respond when called upon, and whether fewer children are exposed to marriage and exploitation.

Parliaments must therefore ask searching questions of the Executive: What has been funded? What has been implemented? Where are the gaps? Who bears responsibility for addressing them?

Second, progressive culture must strengthen the protection of children. Culture is the inheritance through which a people preserve their identity, wisdom and sense of belonging. Its enduring strength lies in its capacity to sustain human dignity and guide each generation in the discharge of its responsibilities. We must preserve the values that unite families, honour responsibility and safeguard children. Where a practice causes harm, we must have the wisdom and courage to reform it. Traditional and religious leaders are indispensable partners in this endeavour. Their counsel can shape conviction, resolve uncertainty and bring protection into the daily life of communities. Their leadership must be engaged with respect and sustained through meaningful partnership.

Third, reliable data must inform action and strengthen accountability.Our 2021–2022 survey recorded that 1.9 per cent of women aged 20 to 24 had married before the age of 18. Each child represented in that figure matters. No level of prevalence should diminish our resolve to prevent further harm.

We welcome the forthcoming launch of the SADC Parliamentary Forum Regional Child Marriage Monitoring Dashboard. It offers an opportunity to identify gaps, monitor legislative and policy progress, and strengthen oversight across the region. Its value will depend upon the decisions it enables us to take. We must understand where risks are greatest, why children remain vulnerable, which interventions are effective and where resources should be directed. Throughout this work, the collection and

use of information must respect the privacy, dignity and safety of every child.

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Our laws must give due weight to prevention through education and understanding. Prohibition establishes the boundary of lawful conduct, and punishment provides consequences for its breach. Lasting change also requires people to understand the harm that the law seeks to prevent and the rights it exists to protect.

Public education must therefore accompany legal reform. Parents must understand the consequences of child marriage. Children must know their rights and where to seek help. Communities must be equipped to recognise risk and respond before harm occurs. The family must remain the first place of protection, and the school one of our strongest instruments of prevention.

The highest achievement of the law is secured when its principles become part of the settled convictions of society: when people protect children because they recognise the justice and necessity of doing so.
This is the understanding we must cultivate, patiently and consistently, across our region.

Your Excellencies, Honourable Members,

Governments cannot fulfil this responsibility alone. Success requires partnership among political, traditional and religious leaders, parents,

educators, civil society, development partners and young people themselves.

Children must be heard in matters affecting their lives. Their experiences should inform the measures designed for their protection, and their trust must be earned through institutions that listen and act. Let each delegation leave Ezulwini with a clear undertaking, an identified responsibility and a definite date for reviewing progress. At our next gathering, we should be able to account for the measures implemented, the communities reached and the children protected.

Our success will be evident in girls who remain in school, children who reach adulthood in safety, and young people who can determine their futures free from coercion and exploitation. Let political leadership supply the resolve; let progressive culture sustain our shared duty of care; and let reliable data guide our decisions and establish our accountability.

May this Assembly renew our determination to build a SADC region in which every child is protected, every childhood is respected and every young person has the opportunity to fulfil their potential.

It is now my honour to declare the 59th Plenary Assembly of the SADC Parliamentary Forum officially open.

I thank you.