

ENDING CHILD MARRIAGE IN ESWATINI- CIVIL SOCIETY PRESENTATION

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Focus of the presentation

- How civil society organisations, mobilise communities, promote children's rights and support children at risk of or already affected by child marriage.

- What National-Level and Regional-Level Actions Are Needed to Strengthen the Prevention and Elimination of Child Marriage?

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Why We Must Act Now

Child marriage remains a serious child protection and human rights concern. It is connected to gender inequality, violence, poverty, harmful social norms and limited opportunities for girls.

- Gender-based violence (GBV) continues to threaten the safety, dignity and rights of women and children in Eswatini.
- Violence, sexual exploitation and reproductive coercion can expose girls to early unintended pregnancy.
- Pregnancy, stigma, family pressure and economic vulnerability can increase the risk of girls being pushed into marriage.
- Child marriage can interrupt education, limit opportunities and expose girls to further violence and abuse.

-The Swaziland Rural Women Assembly (SRWA) Baseline Survey on Gender-Based Violence in Eswatini, conducted in Emvembili, Lubhuku, Emaplotini and Nhlambeni, documented concerns raised by women and girls about early marriage. During the focus group discussions, participants shared that some women, after giving birth to their first children, were compelled by their circumstances to marry the fathers of their children while they were still young. In some cases, the boys were also young. Others faced abandonment

- SWAGAA October2026 Report indicates: Home emerges as leading site of abuse, with 93% of cases reported

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Key figures from 260 young women and girls surveyed across Bhunya, Ngonini and Matsapha

72.2%
of pregnancies among survey participants were unplanned

82.8%
of rural pregnancies were unintended (vs. 69.6% urban)

93.3%
of pregnancies in girls under 18 were unplanned

80.6%
of urban women experienced at least one form of IPV

21%
of all pregnancies involved girls under 18

20.7%
of rural unintended pregnancies resulted from rape or violence

Source: Journey of Hope for Girls and Women in Eswatini Baseline Assessment, February 2026

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What does this means?

- These findings or reports tell us that we cannot address child marriage without addressing the violence, coercion and unequal power relations that expose girls to risk

- Child marriage cannot end without confronting GBV, transforming harmful social norms, strengthening positive cultural practices and demanding national accountability.

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The Legal Framework — Progress and Gaps

Eswatini has established legal frameworks that provide important protections for children and women. However, the existence of laws must translate into protection and justice in every community.

Children's Protection and Welfare Act, 2012

- Establishes protections for children, including the minimum age of marriage of 18.
- Enforcement and awareness remain challenges, particularly in some rural communities.

Sexual Offences and Domestic Violence Act (SODVA), 2018

- Provides a legal framework for addressing sexual offences and domestic violence.
- Many women, girls and community members still lack adequate information about their rights and available reporting mechanisms.

People Trafficking and People Smuggling (Prohibition) Act, 2009

- Provides a framework for addressing trafficking and exploitation.
- Police officers, traditional leaders and other frontline actors need continued training to identify and respond to cases effectively.

IMPORTANT: Laws must be understood, implemented and enforced. Children and survivors must be able to access protection and justice without fear, stigma or discrimination.

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How Is Civil Society Responding to the Crisis and Contributing to Efforts to End Child Marriage?

Civil society is working at different levels: prevention, empowerment and protection:

- **Preventing harm**: Community dialogues, Community Circles,Campaigns on ending violence, Boys for Change initiatives and engagement with traditional and religious leaders.
- **Empowering children**: Girls' Empowerment Clubs, Children with Disabilities Clubs and Protect Our Youth Clubs.
- **On Strengthening protection:** Community Champions/ Pillars of Support, identifying children at risk, referrals and support for children affected by violence.

Recommendations

1. Government should work with traditional institutions, religious leaders, civil society and communities to establish a sustained national programme for promoting positive cultural practices.

This programme could include:

- Community-led dialogues on positive cultural values and child protection.
- Engagement of elders and young people in intergenerational conversations.
- Public recognition of traditional leaders and communities promoting protective practices.
- Positive parenting and non-violent family relationships.
- Promotion of ubuntu, respect, equality and shared responsibility.

Recomendations---cont

2. We call on the Government of Eswatini to take the necessary steps to declare GBV a national disaster, or an equivalent national emergency

- We have spoken about the evidence. We have spoken about the laws. We have spoken about what communities and civil society are doing. But the question remains: Is our national response equal to the seriousness of the problem?"

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3. Government Must Provide sustainable funding for community-based prevention and protection initiatives.

4. Parliament should strengthen oversight of Government commitments, budget allocations and the implementation of child protection laws.

5. At regional level, SADC should strengthen support for community-led monitoring of child protection commitments, facilitate the sharing and replication of effective practices across member states, and advocate for sustainable financial and technical resources for civil society organisations. This would strengthen community participation, regional learning and accountability while ensuring that grassroots organisations have the capacity to sustain their interventions.

Let us protect childhood. Let us reclaim the positive values of our culture. Let us make ending GBV a national priority

I Thank You!