

Enhancing Women's Political Participation in Eswatini



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Ambassador of the USA to Eswatini Her Excellency Ms. Lisa Peterson flanked by WLSA National Director Zanele Thabede-Vilakati (L), Shiselweni Regional MP Hon. Nokuthula Dlamini and WLSA Research Associate Sizakele Hlatshwayo (R)

In its historic mandate of contributing to the socio-economic, political, and legal advancement as well as protection of women and girls, the Eswatini Chapter of Women and Law in Southern Africa (WLSA) has partnered with United Nations Democracy Fund (UNDEF) in a project that seeks to enhance the gender responsiveness of policies and practices in the electoral process in Eswatini by assisting stakeholders to develop gender responsive guidelines and educating citizens on the importance of women's political participation, while empowering the female electorate with leadership skills, campaign and mobilization strategies. Titled 'Enhancing Women's Political Participation in Eswatini', this two-year project seeks to impart a long-term effect by enabling community-based paralegals to conduct gender equality sensitization talks at community level. Paralegals are a product of WLSA's main programs and refer to community-based individuals who have been trained to identify and respond to human rights developments in their communities and be an extension of the organization closer to the people. Activities under this project incorporate actions in response to the Covid-19 crisis, as it impacts women, including gender-based violence as well as social and economic pressures.

The main outcomes of this project, whose overarching objective is to enhance the gender responsiveness of policies and practices in the electoral process in Eswatini, includes ensuring that the Elections and Boundaries Commission (EBC) and other key stakeholders are receptive to a gender responsive electoral process. It also includes achieving increased awareness of gender equity in decision-making among citizens in all four regions of Eswatini. The project is also expected to result in the development of a vote for a woman campaign strategy for the 2023 national elections which will ensure that potential female political leaders are prepared for parliament and have viable campaign strategies ahead of the elections. This, after kingdom has had challenges during back-to-back elections in electing women into Parliament, causing bad publicity for the country and necessitating the invocation of the constitutional provision that requires parliamentarians to constitute themselves in to an electoral college to vote for four women, one from each region, to augment the number of women in the House of Assembly. This is facilitated by the Election of Women into Parliament Act. The project is being rolled out in all four regions of the kingdom, focusing on one community within each of the 59 constituencies which, based on reports of the organization's paralegals, shows

significant numbers of women willing to stand for decision-making positions. One of the major activities under this project is hosting regional women conventions which were being led by Regional Women Members of Parliament. The aim of the regional dialogues was to discuss issues that affect women in Eswatini at a broader level in particular women participation in leadership in order to update and improve the National Gender Agenda developed in 2018. The Gender Agenda is a document that was adopted at national level as providing guidance on gender issues to be deliberated in parliament. The issues cut across legal, socio-economic, health, and economic empowerment. The issues raised in the regional dialogues become the agenda for the four Regional MPs to take up and advocate for in Parliament. This issue of WLSA's inaugural newsletter under this project will reflect on the engagements that formed part of the four dialogues in the regions. We also profile one Regional Woman Member of Parliament, Honorable Lorrain Nxumalo, to find out more about her aspirations and reflect on her thoughts on the state of women in Eswatini.



**Hon. Lubombo
Regional Member of
Parliament Lorraine
Nxumalo.**

Honorable Lorraine Nxumalo is a confident, multiskilled female politician who formed the first batch of MPs elected to add the number of women represented in the House of Assembly. She is passionate about social justice, poverty eradication and ensuring prudent use of public funds. She says she was drawn to politics by her desire to be the voice

of the voiceless who she describes as women, the youth, people living with disabilities and all historically marginalized groups. She feels women are confined and need to be liberated. Asked about challenges that come with being a woman Member of Parliament, she cited the lack of clearly outlined terms of reference or a job description for her as one of them. For that reason, she said, they as women MPs sometimes have to figure out on their own what their role is. She also finds the general expectations women in general have of her as an MP daunting. She says in Parliament, more often than not their ideas as women as women MPs are not taken seriously and only find traction only when they are raised by their male counterparts. The MP also decried the fact as women MPs, they are not considered for the role of chairperson of a portfolio committee or select committee and men are still preferred. Nxumalo further complained that media houses do not give them coverage of their activities and that it would appear that the media places high expectations on women parliamentarians. She also said there was little support for women MPs

generally from civil society and the media in general. Asked about the existing stumbling blocks for women to be in Parliament, MP Nxumalo said gender stereotypes which reinforce the role of a woman as just a helper were prevalent and that when women MPs coalesce to advance their cause, it often seen as a coup by their male counterparts. She again cited the media as not giving the limelight to women MPs. She said another significant hurdle was financial resources. Some of the pressing needs that parliament needs to attend to, according to Hon. Nxumalo are; financial liberation for women and girls and the urgent review of the Marriage Act, Administration of Deceased Estates Act as well as the Intestate Succession Act. By electing women in Parliament, she said the country would benefit because women are practical in their approach to work which would lead to quick decision-making and efficiency in service delivery. Before her term of office comes to an end, Hon. Nxumalo wants to have been able to advocate for all marginalized groups, to have fought gender inequality as well as gender-based violence.

Hhohho Regional Convention

This instalment of the convention was well attended. The Hhohho Regional Woman Member of Parliament, the Hon. Nokunceda Bujela, Manzini South MP Hon. Thandi Nxumalo as well as WLSA National Director Mrs. Zanele Thabede-Vilakati, and other dignitaries graced the event whose participants were made up of grassroots women and business women. Its aim was to, among other things, reflect on some of the resolutions of the last Women's Convention that was held in 2018 and track on progress. It also aimed at offering the constituents an opportunity to interface with their representatives and create a platform for the discussion of a

wide range of issues that affect women from a broad spectrum of legal reforms and policy subjects. Hon. Thandi Nxumalo, who was a guest speaker, called upon the women present to support the election of women into decision-making positions, in particular Parliament. This, she said, would be beneficial to women in general in that the elected women would then push for the enactment of laws which would create an enabling environment for them. The parliamentarians present were encouraged to champion several issues in Parliament, some of which formed discussions during the 2018 Women's Convention. These issues include laws that oppress women such as the marital power law, sexual health and reproductive rights; education, particularly the low number of women who graduate

from tertiary institutions when juxtaposed with men, as well as issues of economic and financial security of women in the country especially the lack of programmes and grants as well as access of loan by ordinary Swati women. Hon. Nxumalo apprised the attendees of some of the inroads she and other women parliamentarians had been able to make in the august House, particularly as regards efforts to pass legislation that is women-friendly and which conform to international and regional instruments. Some of these laws include the Legal Aid Bill. Other efforts cited include efforts to persuade government to tighten enforcement of the Sexual Offences and Domestic Violence (SODV) Act and Land Act.

Lubombo Regional Convention

Held in Mhlume on the 4th of November, this dialogue was graced by the presence of Hon. Member of Parliament Thandi Nxumalo and Hon. Lorraine Nxumalo. This event was also attended by members of the Lutsango regiment from the region, representatives of the Swaziland National Association of Teachers (SNAT), REPF and Lubombo-based paralegals.

In her address, Zanele Thabede-Vilakati, WLSA National Director, mentioned the importance of electing women into Parliament. WLSA Research Associate Sizakele Hlatshwako spoke of how the Constitution guaranteed equality before the law, irrespective of gender and reminded the participants of how, before the constitutional dispensation, women did not have marital power and required their husband's consent to enter into contracts. She appealed to the MPs present to push for the amendment of the Marriage Act to be more favourable to women. She also lobbied the MPs to push for a review of the syllabus so that it is entrepreneurship-oriented and empowers the girl child. She also decried the escalating rate of

gender-based violence cases even in the advent of the Sexual Offences and Domestic Violence Act and called for the putting in place of the regulations.

Hon. Thandi Nxumalo, in her keynote address, said the purpose of the event was to promote equal participation of both genders in decision-making opportunities. She said the electorate, women in particular, defied Their Majesties' plea to vote for women in the 2018 elections. She further said not electing women was counterproductive for women in general in that women are robbed of voiced who can champion their issues in the Legislature. She encouraged the women present to focus on

improving their lives through embarking on income-generating projects.

The women participants present, explaining why women continue to fail to make it to Parliament, said women had a challenge of focusing on each other's weaknesses.

They also cited jealousy among themselves as an impediment and suggested that girls should be groomed in such a way that they have a strong self-esteem. Finances were also cited as a significant hindrance for women making it to Parliament. Hon. Lorraine Nxumalo encouraged women to start income-generating projects to deal with the challenge of finances and empower themselves to stand on their own.



From WLSA National Director's office

Women and Law in Southern Africa has over the years strived to see economic and social change for women and girls in Eswatini. With the common knowledge that women constitute on average 55% percent of the population of Eswatini, it makes sense to want to see growth in the lives of these individuals, so that it transcends to the whole society. In the strive to see development a glaring observation was realized that women do not partake in decision making, because of a long history of male dominance and societal beliefs that a woman's place is in the domestic arena where women do indeed have a full force control and were not given credit for it. All things needed to

bare the face of a man. This would probably be the general perception for some Swati people but the tide is changing and continentally we recognise that to realise the type of development we want to see everyone has to play a role in creating this developed environment. This is what the project seeks to achieve; A political space in which women are able to take part and make decisions. The primary goal of the project is to facilitate a conducive policy and procedural framework which will see gender equity in electoral systems in order to achieve gender equality in representation. The project title is Enhancing women's political Participation in Eswatini and it is but a conjure for

the people of Eswatini to ensure that all genders take part in decision making, for us to realise economic and social development of our beautiful country. By engaging the community as well as the policy framework of the country, we can get to a higher percentile of female representation in the political space.

