

## Disability Inclusion Helpdesk Report No: 148

Query title	Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion (GEDSI) Factsheet – Eswatini
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Query	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What are the key statistics that illustrate gender, disability and social inequalities in Eswatini? Where are the data gaps?</li> <li>What are the most pressing challenges and barriers faced by marginalised groups in Eswatini across the identified themes and how are these shaped by social norms?</li> <li>What policies and legal frameworks exist, and how effective are they in promoting inclusion and equality (including e.g. whether LGBT+ organisations are allowed to operate and register), and access to legal services?</li> </ul>
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### Introduction

The aim of this query is to develop a concise and evidence-based Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion (GEDSI) Factsheet for Eswatini that highlights key statistics, challenges, and barriers faced by marginalised groups, using an intersectional lens. This factsheet will serve as a reference for the British High Commission in Mbabane and their partners, as they engage government partners and other stakeholders on gender, disability and social inclusion. The research responds to the following questions:

- > What are the key statistics that illustrate gender, disability and social inequalities in Eswatini? Where are the data gaps?
- > What are the most pressing challenges and barriers faced by marginalised groups in Eswatini across the identified themes and how are these shaped by social norms?
- > What policies and legal frameworks exist, and how effective are they in promoting inclusion and equality (including e.g. whether LGBT+ organisations are allowed to operate and register), and access to legal services?

The factsheet has collected and analysed recent and reliable data on gender, disability and broader equalities across different thematic areas, including economic inclusion, health, education, political participation, gender-based violence, and security and stability.

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### Key Facts and Statistics within the thematic areas

**General:** Eswatini is a landlocked country in Southern Africa and is one of the smallest countries in Africa. In 2024, its population was 1,242,822 (49% male and 50.9% female) ([World Bank, 2025](#)) and is primarily composed of the Swazi ethnic group, mixed with a small number of Zulus and other ethnic groups ([U.S. Department of State, n.d.](#)). Eswatini is a lower-middle income country (LMIC); however it is estimated that 54.8% of the population are below the LMIC poverty line, and Eswatini reports a Gini coefficient of 54.6 ([World Bank, 2025](#)), reflecting deep inequality. The average life expectancy in Eswatini is relatively low (64 years; 61 for men and 67 for women), driven by high rates of HIV and non-communicable diseases ([UN Data](#) (Social Indicators) 2024).

Eswatini is an absolute monarchy with a dual governance structure, consisting of a modern state framework and a parallel traditional system. The Constitution (2005) is the supreme law. It establishes three branches of government (the Executive, a bicameral Legislature, and the Judiciary) and guarantees fundamental freedoms and advances principles of participation, accountability and gender equity. However, while there are some signs of progress, positive policy and legislative frameworks to advance social inclusion, patriarchal and other social norms drive widespread inequality and discrimination against marginalised groups.

The King holds ultimate executive authority. The Constitution also recognises unwritten Swazi law and custom, which at times conflicts with international human rights norms and standards ([UN Eswatini 2022](#)). Even though the Constitution theoretically guarantees human rights, it was evident in the riots in 2021 that this was not the case. Life sentences were issued to two MPs who were calling for political reform, and a human rights lawyer, Thulane Maseko, was murdered after exposing abuses of power and calling for political reforms ([Amnesty, 2024](#); [Amnesty 2024](#)).

**Gender equality:** There has been limited progress towards women's rights and gender equality, for example, some progressive rulings and legal reforms, such as the 2018 High Court ruling that overturned the common-law doctrine of marital power designating the husband as the ruler of the household. Global indices give Eswatini a higher ranking on progress towards gender equality when the assessment is based on formal laws, policies and access to services (47/146 countries in the Global Gender Gap Index, second quintile). However, when assessments take into account structural inequalities involving norms and customary laws, Eswatini is given a much lower ranking (141/160 countries in the Gender Inequality Index, fifth quintile) ([Coope, Mabundza, and Sihlongonyane, 2025](#)).

**Disability:** According to the Population and Housing Census in 2017, approximately 13% of Eswatini's population face difficulties in performing certain functions, most commonly related to vision (32.6%) and mobility (26.5%), with the rate higher for women than men. In 2012, Eswatini formally ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) – however, a study by UNPRPD found that practical actions on the ground are lacking ([UNPRPD, 2022](#)).

**LGBT+:** There is no national census or government data on the LGBT+ population, so data

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comes from small scale studies. Legal barriers (same-sex activity between men is criminalised), stigma and fear of disclosure may mean that even these are unlikely to capture the full picture of LGBT+ identities and experiences in Eswatini.

**Children:** Child poverty rates are high, particularly for a LMIC - 65.3% of children in Eswatini live below the international poverty line and 40.6% are in extreme poverty ([UNICEF, 2024](#)). Only 10% and 17% of the budget is allocated to health and education social sectors respectively although the education budget (including support for inclusive education) has been boosted in 2025. Social assistance interventions for children in poverty remain inadequate and poorly targeted ([Coope, 2025](#)).

### Education

- > **Every Emaswati child has the right to free education in public school** until the end of Grade 7 (end of primary school). The Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) provides pupils with free books, stationery, school furniture and feeding programs. Primary education is free, but costs associated with education, such as building construction costs, make it unaffordable for poorer parents and families. Places in schools are not guaranteed, and there are often reports of parents having to pay a bribe to secure a place for their children.
- > Boys and girls in **Eswatini continue to be socialised separately according to prevailing gender norms and expectations**, which primarily position women as caregivers, thereby limiting their opportunities for economic participation and personal development ([Coope, Mabundza, and Sihlongonyane, 2025](#)). High schools in Eswatini unintentionally reinforce patriarchal gender norms through extracurricular activities (such as gender segregation in sports), subject specialisms (such as boys frequently encouraged into STEM subjects and girls to humanities), and curriculum content ([Makamure, 2025](#)).
- > **Eswatini's performance in the education sector is lower than the average of other LMICs.** There is a 91% enrolment rate at primary education, however retention and attainment rates are very low. By the end of Grade 7, 20% of students still lack foundational literacy and 44% lack foundational numeracy, driving high repetition and dropout rates ([UNICEF, 2024](#)). These low figures are linked to low school readiness, low attendance rates, and inaccessible school programmes.
- > **The primary school completion rate is 91% and 89% for girls and boys respectively**, as of 2023 ([World Bank, 2025](#)). However, lower secondary school completion rates in 2023 for both boys and girls were poorer at 74% ([World Bank, 2025](#)). The last available data on tertiary school enrolment for boys and girls was in 2013, and therefore out of date.
- > **It is estimated that 52% of children with disabilities are out of school**, and only a small percentage (unknown) have higher qualifications, which contributes to higher levels of unemployment among people with disabilities ([Deputy Prime Ministers Office, 2024](#)).

### Health

- > An [HIV Impact Assessment in 2021](#) found that the **annual incidence of HIV among adults in Eswatini was 0.62%, with approximately 4,000 new cases per year**. HIV incidence and prevalence is much higher among women (1.11% and 30.4% respectively) than among men (0.17% and 18.7%). Younger women are at particular risk; in the 25-29-year age group, HIV prevalence was more than five times higher among women than men.

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- > **Widespread poverty and patriarchal norms drive this gender disparity on HIV rates, alongside increasing rates of sexual violence against women (especially younger women),** the legacy of the Covid-19 pandemic driving up rates of transactional sex ([The Global Fund, 2021](#)), and **unequal power relationships within age-disparate sexual partnerships, reducing young women's capacity to negotiate safer sex** ([DPMO 2024](#)).
- > **More women have a disability than men (58%)** and most people with disabilities are located in rural areas, living in poverty with limited access to information, education and healthcare (meaning their healthcare needs are often unmet). Additionally, women with disabilities do not have access to sexual and reproductive health services and information, limiting their ability to make informed decisions on their sexuality and reproductive health ([Masuku, Bormman, and Johnson, 2021](#)).

### Economic Inclusion

- > [The World Bank](#) has noted that the prevalence of **vulnerable employment for women has improved since 1991**. Workers in *vulnerable employment* are least likely to have formal work arrangements or access to social protection guarding against economic shocks, making them more likely to fall into poverty. More women (39.6%) were in vulnerable employment than men (26.4%) in 2023. Additionally, women have notably lower stable formal employment rates and earnings than men, and the gender earnings gap for women is higher in self-employment than in wage employment ([Schwidrowski et al., 2021](#)). The last available data on this was in 2013.
- > **The rate of women holding an account (either with a financial institution or with a mobile-money-service provider) is higher than of men**, at 69.2% and 62.4% respectively. There is currently no data available for house ownership status by sex, or time spent on unpaid domestic and care work. ([World Bank, n.d.](#)). Although the Swazi Constitution guarantees equal land access regardless of gender, traditional leaders often ignore this requirement, restricting women's land rights to those mediated through male relatives under customary practices, with women only being granted land rights by men ([Nyawo, 2023](#)).
- > **Only 28% of the population with disabilities is employed, indicating significant unemployment across people with disabilities** ([UNICEF, 2024](#)) People with visual, hearing and mobility impairments face obstacles to access the labour market. More people with disabilities who are in employment work within the private sector (16.2%), and only 1.1% are employed within public services. 39.5% of persons with disabilities are reported to be employed in family farm/businesses ([Mavundla, n.d.](#)). An analysis of Violence Against Children and Youth Survey found that adolescent girls and young women with a disability were more likely to experience food insecurity (67%) compared to those without (59.7%) ([Besera et al 2022](#)).
- > **A study across Eswatini, Malawi and Zimbabwe surveyed 663 individuals on social exclusion of LGBT+ people at structural, individual, household and community levels.** It found that 60% of LGBT+ people in Eswatini did not have enough money for everyday needs and 40% were unemployed. It also found that over half of respondents thought it was likely that an LGBT+ person can participate in the formal and informal economy without experiencing discrimination. However, nearly three quarters (73%) of respondents thought it was unlikely an LGBT+ person could disclose their Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, and Sex Characteristics (SOGIESC) at work ([Muller and Judge, 2022](#)).

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- > **Most respondents (76%) believed that an LGBT+ individual had a fair chance of accessing banking services or obtaining a loan without facing discrimination.** Conversely, nearly 80% of respondents doubted that an LGBT+ person could own or access land, with 78% considering it unlikely ([Muller and Judge, 2022](#)), implying a divergence of views and behaviours between private sector and traditional decision makers (most land in Eswatini is managed and allocated by chiefs, according to customary law).
- > **Nationally, 58% of youth are unemployed, and youth unemployment is most prevalent in rural areas.** The government set up the Youth Enterprise Revolving Fund to support young entrepreneurs and promote youth-led economic development through technical and financial support. This has contributed to the country's economic development, job creation, poverty reduction and youth innovation. Currently 24% of the MSMEs are owned by youth, aged 18-34 years, and are within the wholesale/retail (47%), agriculture (20%) and business services (13%) ([FinScope, 2023](#)).

### Political Participation

- > **Women's parliamentary political representation (29% across upper and lower houses) is slightly above the Sub-Saharan African average of 27%, and young persons'<sup>1</sup> representation (32%) is slightly below the Sub-Saharan average of 37% at the time of writing** ([IPU 2025](#), Parline database). The official figure generally used relates to the lower house only (e.g., the [World Bank](#) reports that 22% of seats in the national parliament are held by women). Both figures are below the 30% quota set in the Constitution, although rates of representation have been improving in recent years.
- > Overall voter registration figures increased in the 2023 election, and **54% of registered voters were women** (Elections and Boundaries Commission, quoted in the [African Union Election Observation Mission](#) (AUEOM) report, 2023). However, [Gender Links](#) (2020) reports that women can be excluded from participating in electoral processes due to their economic and household responsibilities, or as a result of mourning rituals for widows. Additionally, married women may require the approval of their husband to vote or participate in elections.
- > **Official breakdowns of social groups within Parliament are only available by age and sex.** Freedom House ([2024](#)) reports that "there are virtually no members of ethnic, racial, religious, or other minority groups in the government, as most officials have some connection to the royal family or its broader clan. Women are politically marginalised, as are LGBT+ individuals and people with disabilities."

### Gender-based Violence

- > 43% of Emaswati surveyed believe that **GBV is 'somewhat' or 'very' common in their community**, and constitutes the most important women's-rights issue that the government and society must address ([Afrobarometer](#) 2025). The most recent adult GBV prevalence figures are WHO modelled estimates (2018, in [UN Women Data Hub](#) 2025), estimating that 17.7% of women aged 15-49 years reported that they had been subject to intimate partner violence (physical and/or sexual violence) in the previous 12 months. The same report positioned Eswatini's prevalence figures as relatively average for the region.
- > For young people, **25.5% of women and 31.7% of men aged 13-24 had experienced**

<sup>1</sup> Defined as 45 years or below by the IPU

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**some form of violence.** 8.1% of women had experienced sexual violence compared to 3.3% of men. Among women and girls aged 13–24 who experienced sexual violence, nearly two-thirds disclosed the incident, but only one-quarter sought professional services ([DPMO](#) 2022).

- > **Rates of child marriage are very low for the region (2% of girls by age 18)** ([Girls Not Brides](#), 2025), though they are higher among women with no schooling (5.4%) ([UNICEF Child Marriage Data Portal](#) 2025; figure from MICS 2021/22).
- > **Girls with functional disabilities have substantially higher lifetime exposure to both sexual and physical violence compared to their peers without disabilities.** Lifetime exposure to sexual and physical violence was estimated as affecting 14.4% and 16.5% (respectively) of girls with a disability compared to 7.1% and 9.5% for girls without disabilities. The prevalence of violence among girls and young women who had a primary education or less is significantly higher compared with females who completed more than secondary school (15.9% versus 6.6%) ([Besera et al](#) 2025; [Deputy Prime Minister's Office](#), 2023).
- > **74% of LGBT+ people surveyed in a 2019 study had been subject to SOGIESC-motivated violence.** While the numbers surveyed were relatively small, the results showed a higher incidence of violence among gender minority individuals (81% lifetime incidence). While it is not possible to verify perpetrators' motives, these figures are based on perceptions of violence victims/survivors and have a clear link to levels of stress and mental health problems. 51% of those reporting experience of physical or sexual violence also showed signs of post-traumatic stress ([Muller et al 2019](#)).
- > The Center for Collaborative Investigative Journalism (CCIJ) found patterns showing **serious underreporting of GBV**. Court analysis found over 330 GBV-related charges, including 253 rape cases, since 1977 ([Global Investigative Journalism Network](#) 2025). It also identified 145 intimate partner femicides in Eswatini between 2009 and 2022 and around 70 murder cases that were related in some way to sexual offenses and domestic violence.
- > **Eswatini's National Strategy to End Violence (2023-27) covers the reduction of both GBV and other forms of violence.** The associated action plan is costed at about U.S. \$2.75 million ([Deputy Prime Minister's Office](#), 2023), and "follows an earlier iteration (2017- 2022) that critics argue was poorly implemented and grossly underfunded" ([Human Rights Watch](#), 2024, in [Afrobarometer](#) 2025).

### Security and Stability

- > **Intentional homicide rates in Eswatini rose gradually through the 2012–2021** period to approximately 12.5 per 100,000 population in 2021, but remained well below an earlier peak of approximately 19.8 per 100,000 in 2008 (UN SDG/[UNODC](#) time series).
- > **VACS 2022 reports that among women aged 18–24, 8.8% witnessed physical violence in the home during childhood**, and 13.8% witnessed physical violence in the community. This seems relatively low compared to other countries in the region (see, for example, Namibia and Lesotho figures in [Amene et al](#) 2024).
- > **According to Afrobarometer, public perceptions surveyed show that harassment of women is prevalent.** Approximately 27% of adults say women are "often" or "always" sexually harassed in public places (markets/streets/public transport), and 74% say that the police and courts need to do more to protect women and girls from discrimination and harassment ([Afrobarometer](#) 2025).

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- > An analysis of VACS data ([Besera et al](#)) found that **children who witnessed violence at home had a higher prevalence of experiencing violence themselves**. For boys and young men, 23.5% of those witnessing violence experienced violence, versus 6.3% who did not. The finding is similar for girls and young women (22.9% versus 6.8%). Women who were married or cohabiting had significantly higher prevalence of violence than those who were unmarried (16.6% versus 7.3%).

### Challenges and barriers faced by marginalised groups

#### Education

- > Children in Eswatini face several context-specific barriers to education, particularly girls in upper primary and secondary school. Teenage pregnancy is a leading cause of school dropout among girls, accounting for approximately **18% of dropouts in primary school** and rising to **35% in junior secondary school** ([UN Women](#), 2024, quoting 2019 figures). More broadly, **41% of dropouts in lower secondary school** and **52% in senior secondary school** are attributed to pregnancy ([UNICEF](#), n.d., citing 2015 figures).
- > **Limited access to menstrual hygiene products**, particularly among girls in rural and low-income communities, compound educational challenges for girls. A situational analysis found that adolescent girls in urban areas, and who were in school, were much more likely to have access to sanitary materials, than those in rural access or out of school ([UNICEF](#), 2022).
- > **Violence remains a significant barrier to education for girls in Eswatini** - 7.8% of girls aged 13-17 reported missing school or not leaving home due to fear of violence or safety concerns in the past year ([VACS](#), 2022). When at school, 29% of Afrobarometer respondents in 2025 reported that girls “often” or “always” face discrimination, harassment, or sexual favours demanded by teachers (Afrobarometer, 2025). Violence can have significant impacts on the educational outcomes of children, including learning performance, attendance, future employment, brain development and mental and physical health ([Saggu, 2024](#)).
- > **People with disabilities cannot access education, health services, public buildings and transportation on an equal basis to people without disabilities**. Despite the law protecting the rights of people with disabilities to access these services, there is low awareness and enforcement of these regulations. Children with disabilities are placed into ‘mainstream’ schools without adequate support due to lack of teacher training or support. There is only one private school for students with hearing impairments and one for children with physical or mental disabilities ([Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labour, 2023](#)).
- > **There is currently no law or policy that expressly prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity and expression and sex characteristics (SOGIESC)** in schools and/or other educational institutions. There is no sexuality education and no affirming content about sexual and gender diversity ([Muller and Judge, 2022](#)).
- > **Orphanhood** - often due to HIV/AIDS – poses additional challenges for inclusion. Around **32% of secondary-school-age children** in Eswatini are classified as orphans and vulnerable children (OVCs), many of whom face food insecurity, emotional distress, and lack of parental support (UNFPA, 2025). These factors can negatively affect concentration, increase the risk of exploitation, and result in poor academic outcomes. While the government provides an annual **OVC Education Grant of E1,950** to support these learners, structural disadvantages persist ([UNFPA](#), 2025), and the grant is poorly targeted, excluding

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those most in need ([Coope, Mabundza & Sihlongonyane, 2025](#)).

- > **A combination of orphanhood and poverty, driving parents to leave their children in search of work, has led to high numbers of children being cared for by their grandparents.** A study of such households found that these children were particularly vulnerable. The emotional stress and financial burdens faced by grandparents raising their grandchildren can negatively impact the children's education, leading to poor performance and lack of motivation. Additionally, the educational level of grandparents as caregivers affects the grandchildren's educational attainment, with lower levels of education potentially resulting in less learning support and higher dropout rates, leading to a cycle of poverty and vulnerability ([Madegwa, Piliyesi & Katundano, 2019](#); [Motsa and Morojele, 2022](#)).
- > **Statelessness has become an issue in Eswatini, due to discrimination in nationality law and birth registration problems.** Children who are deemed to be stateless, due to lack of citizenship or documentation, and children born to refugee families in Eswatini, may be unable to access key services, including education. Women cannot automatically pass on their nationality to their children, which is likely to lead to lower birth registration and access to services for their children. Additionally, children of asylum seekers are not entitled to free primary and secondary school ([Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labour, 2023](#); [Citizenship Rights in Africa Initiative, n.d.](#)).

### Economic Inclusion

- > **Women-owned businesses often operate informally and are financially constrained, relying more than their male counterparts on loans from non-bank lenders or informal credit providers.** This negatively affects their business growth, productivity and performance, often leading to a continuous cyclical reliance on lenders ([Ajetomobi et al., 2022](#)).
- > While official statistics may suggest progress towards gender equality in employment levels, **women still face additional obstacles in finding work.** One study found that one third of citizens say women are often or always barred by their spouses or other family members from taking paid employment ([Afrobarometer, 2025](#)).
- > **Studies show that gender inequality in leadership remains entrenched in Eswatini, with women underrepresented in decision-making roles across education, politics, government, business, and civil society (despite being the majority in the population and teaching workforce).** Patriarchal norms limit women's aspirations and access to leadership, while those in leadership face gender bias, work-family conflicts, lack of networks, and limited peer support. ([Nkambule and Perumal \(2024\)](#)
- > **Regardless of their qualifications, people with disabilities in Eswatini face serious barriers to employment.** OPDs report discrimination in hiring, ill-treatment at work, and unfair dismissals. While national policy encourages inclusive hiring, implementation remains weak. Poor accessibility in public transport, buildings, and communication systems continues to exclude people with disabilities from jobs and services ([UNPRPD, 2022](#)).
- > **LGBT+ people in Eswatini face various forms of economic exclusion.** They experience barriers to education that make it harder to find employment. They have difficulties securing and retaining jobs; they are widely excluded or under-represented in the economy in general; and there is an absence of community engagement schemes and youth funds for LGBT+ people ([Muller and Judge, 2022](#)).
- > **There are credible accounts that the government places limitations on refugees' right**

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**to work even after official recognition of refugee status.** There are reports that refugees face challenges in securing work permits, or are refused permits outright, with officials citing policies aimed at prioritising local workers ([Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labour, 2023](#)).

### Health

- > **There are healthcare disparities between people with and without disabilities in Eswatini.** One study found a widespread lack of resources and services for people with disabilities, including shortages of rehabilitation healthcare practitioners, poor access to assistive devices, lack of reasonable accommodations for people with visual and communicative impairments, inaccessible and expensive transport (or long distances to healthcare services), stigma and discrimination within the healthcare system, and inadequate social grants ([Masuku, Bornman, and Johnson, 2021](#)). Another study found serious shortcomings in accessible infrastructure and information in sexual and reproductive health (SRH) facilities ([UNFPA 2020](#)). There is only one hospital for people with mental disabilities, which is reported to be overcrowded and understaffed.
- > One study found **LGBT+ people have high levels of mental health concerns, have experienced more violence, and have faced barriers to healthcare.** Overall, 61% of participants had told their healthcare provider about their SOGIESC. While the majority of participants had not been denied healthcare (30% had), more than half had said healthcare staff had treated them disrespectfully because of their SOGIESC. 44% of people hid health concerns related to their SOGIESC from a healthcare provider ([Muller, Daskilewicz, and Southern and East African Research Collective on Health, 2019](#)).
- > World Vision Eswatini have observed that **there is a concerning increase in mental health challenges amongst refugees living in the Malindza Refugee Reception Centre,** exacerbated by limited psychosocial support, domestic tensions and increased incidents of violence. The Centre is experiencing a surge in chronic illnesses, overcrowding and great strain on its infrastructure and essential services ([Gwebu, 2025](#)).

### Political Participation

- > **No reliable figures on women's representation in traditional leadership, official or otherwise, are available.** A recent systematic review found very little literature on women's leadership (political and otherwise) in Eswatini ([Nkambule and Perumal 2024](#)), and noted that several authors "conclude that the root cause of all these challenges is that Eswatini remains predominantly a patriarchal society in which cultural norms and religious institutions significantly influence the moulding of gender identities." There are some reports of women's routine exclusion from local decision-making processes ([Hlatswayo 2025](#)), for example, ensuring that women only occupy low-status positions in their *bandlancane* (chiefdom's inner council).
- > **A large majority (86%) of people say that women should have the same chance as men to be elected to political office** ([Afrobarometer 2023](#)), but 45% think a woman candidate is likely to face harassment and family problems. Just over one-third (35%) of Emaswati say their government is doing a good job of promoting gender equality, and 80% say the government "needs to do more to promote equal rights and opportunities for women" ([Afrobarometer 2023](#)).

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- > **Official observers of the 2023 national election found that persons with disabilities experienced serious barriers to participation in the election process** – while ad-hoc physical and staff support was provided, most polling stations were not accessible ([African Union Election Observation Mission](#) 2023).

### Gender-Based Violence

- > **Acceptance of GBV, according to standard DHS/MICS measures, is low for the region and has dropped in recent years.** 8% of women say a husband is justified in hitting or beating his wife in at least one of the five standard MICS scenarios (burns food, argues, goes out without telling, neglects children, refuses sex) ([UNICEF Data](#), 2025), down from 27% in 2010 ([Chemhaka, Moyo, Simelane and Odimegwu](#) 2023).
- > In a recent comprehensive analysis of court records, the Centre for Collaborative Investigative Journalism found that **Eswatini's courts systematically fail to deliver justice for survivors of sexual violence** ([Global Investigative Journalism Network](#) 2025).
- > The dual justice system (formal courts alongside customary/traditional courts presided over chiefs) **frequently reproduces discriminatory norms.** Traditional courts do not always apply constitutional protections, and survivors of SGBV often face stigma and barriers to formal justice. ([ICJ 2020](#); [U.S. Department of State 2024](#); [UN Women](#) 2023; [Verité](#) 2023).
- > **Most Emaswati stated in a recent survey that physical force is never justified to 'discipline women'** (91%), and that this sort of GBV is the most important women's rights issue that the government and society must address (41%). Most regard domestic violence as a criminal matter (69%) and believe that the police are likely to take GBV cases seriously (82%). However, the survey also found that "more than one-third (36%) of respondents consider it likely that a woman will be criticised, harassed, or shamed if she reports GBV to the authorities" ([Afrobarometer](#) 2025).
- > The best and most recent evidence on help-seeking comes from VACS 2022 for adolescents and young people: **among 13–24-year-old women and girls who experienced lifetime sexual violence, 66.3% told someone about the incident, 50.5% knew where to seek help, 25.7% sought professional services and 23.1% received professional services.** For physical violence, the proportions seeking services were slightly higher (31.4%).
- > Administrative and programme reports ([UNICEF](#) 2020, [UNFPA](#) 2022, [One UN national GBV service data](#) 2022) show that services for adult survivors exist and are being scaled up (one-stop models, clinical and psychosocial referrals), but **nationally comparable population-level help-seeking rates for adult women and for LGBT+ survivors are not available.** Civil society studies document barriers that suppress reporting of GBV among marginalised groups.
- > There are smaller studies, however, that surveyed LGBT+ people about their experiences of violence. One study (Muller et al 2019) found that **one in five (21%) of LGBT+ survey participants who experienced any sexual or physical violence in the last year had reported the incident to the police, and 44% had sought health care.**

### Security and Stability

- > **Women in Eswatini more likely to feel unsafe than men.** When at home alone, 63.1% of women feel safe, compared to 94.9% of men. 33.8% of women feel safe walking alone in

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their neighbourhood after dark, compared to 76.7% of men. Poorer women are much more likely to feel unsafe in either situation ([Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey \(MICS\) 2021/22](#))

- > **Persons with disabilities in Eswatini face systemic barriers in accessing justice**, including inaccessible infrastructure, lack of reasonable accommodations, and a justice system not geared to their needs ([UNPRPD, 2022](#)). While a recent review by the International Commission of Jurists signals judicial willingness to align practice with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, significant implementation gaps remain ([ICJ, 2022](#)).
- > **Almost half of LGBT+ people surveyed (48%) did not think it was likely at all that an LGBT+ person could be in public spaces without fear of discrimination or violence** ([Muller et al 2022](#))

### Policies and legal frameworks

- > Eswatini has committed to **advancing women's rights and ending gender discrimination** by ratifying key agreements like the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, and by adopting national policies such as the National Gender Policy and the Sexual Offences and Domestic Violence Act ([Department of Gender and Family Issues, 2024](#)).
- > **The National Gender Policy (2023)** promotes gender equality through legal reforms, better education and economic opportunities, action against gender-based violence, and reduced health inequalities, while aligning with global and regional gender commitments ([UNESCO, 2023](#)).
- > **The Sexual Offences and Domestic Violence Act (2018)** modernises laws on sexual and domestic abuse, criminalises marital rape and child abuse, and strengthens victim protections. However, a 2024 review found too few cases to show clear patterns of impact from this legislative reform ([CCIJ, 2024](#)).
- > **The Social Protection Framework and National Social Security Policy** cover different vulnerable groups, including the **Old Age Grant (2005)** which is universal for citizens 60+ years, many of whom care for orphaned children ([UNICEF, 2010](#)); and the **Disability Grant (2024–2028)**, which is part of the National Disability Plan of Action, promoting disability-inclusive social protection.
- > Some social assistance programmes (**Neighbourhood Care Points** and **school feeding programmes**) rely on unpaid volunteer support in order to function. Other social assistance programmes function as income replacement for the primary beneficiary (the Disability Grant and Older Persons Grant). Neither the Disability Grant nor the Older Persons Grant recognise or compensate carers for their contributions. Given that they constitute the vast majority of carers, women are disproportionately disadvantaged by the burden of unpaid care work ([Coope, 2025](#)).
- > **Eswatini introduced the National Disability Policy (2013), National Disability Bill of Rights (2014), and National Disability Plan of Action (2015)**, which promise healthcare access, assistive devices, and rehabilitation, but weak implementation leaves many barriers and discriminatory practices in place ([Masuku, Bornman, & Johnson, 2021](#)). The **National Disability Plan of Action (2024–2028)** prioritises political participation, advocacy, and mainstreaming disability inclusion, but no evidence of progress has been published ([Deputy Prime Minister's Office, 2024](#)).

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- > A wide range of **education-related frameworks support disability inclusion**, including the National Development Strategy (1999), National Population Policy Framework (2002), National Education Policy (1999), Constitution (2005), Education and Training Sector Policy (2011, updated 2018), Inclusive Education Policy (2005/2006), National Youth Policy, Swaziland National Sports Policy, National Social Development Policy, and National Children's Policy ([Asogwa, Muntu, Mlondi, n.d.](#)). More on these can be found in Annex 1.
- > **The Constitution sets a 30% gender quota for MPs**, which was nearly met in 2023. No quotas exist for people with disabilities, youth, or other marginalised groups, despite advocacy for disability quotas ([Gender Links, 2020](#); [UNPRPD, 2023](#)).
- > **Laws on child marriage conflict**: The Marriages Act (1964) allows exceptions below 16/18, while the Children's Protection and Welfare Act (2012) bans child marriage and gives under-18s the right to refuse, but prosecutions are rare ([EswatiniLII 2012](#); [Girls Not Brides, 2025](#)).
- > Official reports highlight **women's involvement in peace and reconciliation efforts**, mainly through civil society organisations ([Deputy Prime Minister's Office 2024](#)).
- > Eswatini has adopted a **National Legal Aid Policy** and set up a **Legal Aid Office** to support marginalised groups, but data on its reach and effectiveness is unavailable ([Ministry of Justice and Constitutional Affairs, 2023](#); [UNDP, 2023](#)).

### Civil Society Organisations – Operating in Eswatini

- > **Freedom House assesses Eswatini as “not free”** (17/100 on their 'Freedom in the World scale, [Freedom House, 2024](#)) and pro-democracy protests have been met with heavy-handed state security responses ([Amnesty International, 2021](#)). Accountability for human rights abuses has been limited, and unrest, including targeted attacks on activists, continued into 2022-23 ([Human Rights Watch, 2023](#)). **NGO (and Women Rights Organisations) operations are extremely constrained** ([Freedom House, 2024](#)). Forthcoming legislation (Non-Profit Organisations Bill) may further shrink civic space for NPOs, and the Computer Crime and Cybercrime Act enables online targeting of activists. However, there are some emerging signs of greater engagement between government and civil society on human rights reporting ([EUSEE/Hivos 2025](#)).
- > **Women's Rights Organisations (WROs) operate in Eswatini, but space for them to operate freely is highly constrained by entrenched patriarchal laws and structural causes of inequality** ([SALC et al., 2025](#)).
- > **There is a gap between the Constitutional rights of LGBT+ people, and the space for LGBT+ organisations to operate in Eswatini.** For example, while the Supreme Court ruled that Eswatini Sexual and Gender Minorities (ESGM) could register as a nonprofit organization to advocate for matters affecting LGBT+ individuals, this continues to be blocked by the Ministry of Commerce ([Human Dignity Trust, 2024](#)).
- > **There are several Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs), but they find it difficult to attract attention, to access funding, to form partnerships with governments, and to fill administrative and technical capacity gaps.** Consultation with government is reported as frequent, but extractive and tokenistic, rather than as a process that recognises and strengthens the role of OPDs, with real scope for genuine voice, influence or technical engagement ([UNPRPD 2021](#)).

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### Annex 1 – Detail on Policies and Strategies that Promote Disability Inclusion in the Education Sector ([Asogwa, Muntu, Mlondi, n.d.](#))

- > **National Development Strategy (NDS, 1999):** Identifies people with disabilities as a disadvantaged group and outlines measures for integration, rehabilitation, equal opportunities, and protection from discrimination.
- > **National Population Policy Framework (2002):** Provides guidance on population development issues, including ensuring that persons with disabilities are considered in planning for equitable access to services and opportunities.
- > **National Education Policy (1999):** Establishes education for all as a priority and specifically mandates that children with disabilities should be included in mainstream schooling.
- > **Constitution of Eswatini (2005):** Guarantees fundamental rights and freedoms for all citizens, prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability, and allows affirmative action to redress past inequalities.
- > **Education and Training Sector Policy (EDSEC, 2011; updated 2018):** Promotes equitable, inclusive, and quality education, mainstreams inclusive education across the system, and aligns with national, regional, and international obligations.
- > **Inclusive Education Policy (drafted 2005, implemented 2006):** Introduces structures for inclusive practices in schools, requires annual reporting on inclusion progress, and seeks to create a comprehensive national system for inclusive education.
- > **National Youth Policy:** Ensures that all young people, including those with disabilities, have access to programmes and services that promote their development and participation in national growth.
- > **Swaziland National Sports Policy:** Requires sports associations and facilities to be disability-inclusive, ensuring accessibility standards and the inclusion of disability sections in sporting codes.
- > **National Social Development Policy:** Aims to promote social protection and welfare, including measures that address the rights and needs of persons with disabilities.
- > **National Children's Policy:** Provides for the protection, development, and participation of all children, with provisions that safeguard the rights of children with disabilities.

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**About Helpdesk reports:** The Disability Inclusion Helpdesk is funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office (FCDO), contracted through the Disability Inclusion Team (DIT) under the Disability Inclusive Development Inclusive Futures Programme. Helpdesk reports are based on between 3 and 4.5 days of desk-based research per query and are designed to provide a brief overview of the key issues and expert thinking on issues around disability inclusion. Where referring to documented evidence, Helpdesk teams will seek to understand the methodologies used to generate evidence and will summarise this in Helpdesk outputs, noting any concerns with the robustness of the evidence being presented. For some Helpdesk services, in particular the practical know-how queries, the emphasis will be focused far less on academic validity of evidence and more on the validity of first-hand experience among disabled people and practitioners delivering and monitoring programmes on the ground. All sources will be clearly referenced.

Helpdesk services are provided by a consortium of leading organisations and individual experts on disability, including Social Development Direct, Sightsavers, ADD International, Light for the World, Humanity & Inclusion, BRAC, BBC Media Action, Sense and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS). Expert advice may be sought from this Group, as well as from the wider academic and practitioner community, and those able to provide input within the short time-frame are acknowledged. Any views or opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect those of FCDO, the Disability Inclusion Helpdesk or any of the contributing organisations/experts.

For any further request or enquiry, contact [enquiries@disabilityinclusion.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@disabilityinclusion.org.uk)

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