



Dear Friends, Readers and Donors,

Thula and I are still immersed in the culture down here in Eswatini. Thula is doing well at her international school and I am managing quite well to fill my days. This affords the real luxury of so much more time with Joe, our employee, and our students of Swazi Kids, and our projects.

Recently, I guided a small group of women here for two weeks. This is something that I do each year as a side hustle, (see the bottom of this newsletter for more details on my trips.) On this particular trip, we were joined by an independent journalist named Katharine Lake-Berz. I thought to shake things up for you that I would use the backbone of her writing as the backbone of this newsletter. Katharine brings fresh eyes to the stark realities of what can go on for women and girls down here.

Although I am well aware of these issues, through my eyes I also see great promise and I have chosen in recent years, when I can, I bring you the good news. This presents more of a hidden or behind the scenes investigation. The topic is tough, so I will apologize in advance, but it is also true. I have edited out some of the rougher stories, see the link at the bottom to read her article in its entirety.



A kingdom of shocking pain and suffering: How this country is trying to escape a deadly epidemic and its history.



BY KATHARINE LAKE-BERZ, SPECIAL TO THE STAR
[For the full article <---](#)

Eswatini has the most serious HIV/AIDS problem in the world, and has put serious effort into reducing it. But longstanding beliefs and sexual behaviours, including those of the king himself, stand in the way of progress.



Even with determined efforts to curb the epidemic, AIDS is still the leading cause of death in Eswatini, a tiny, impoverished kingdom between South Africa and Mozambique previously known as Swaziland.

Eswatini has attacked the virus vigorously. The country of 1.2 million has exceeded targets on HIV-treatment coverage and prevention of mother-to-child transmission, according to United Nations monitoring. Internationally funded clinics offer free access to testing and to antiretroviral medications that can keep people infected with HIV healthy for decades.

But the country still has the highest prevalence rate of HIV in the world. Almost one in three Swazi adults are living with the virus compared to one in five adults in the next most afflicted countries: Lesotho, Botswana and South Africa.

The causes for this tragedy are almost as clear as the numbers. Ancient mores and traditions protect and at times encourage dangerous sexual activities, including widespread sexual violence and incest, which is mostly kept hidden.

According to United Nations reports, one in three Swazi girls experiences sexual violence before age 18 and almost 20 per cent of women say that they have been abused in the past 12 months. Although women's advocates say that most incidents of rape are not reported, the country has the fourth highest rate of reported rape in the world.

Mostly, victims and families of victims do not turn in the men who commit these rapes. "They don't see (rape or) incest as a criminal offence," said Dlamini, director of the Swazi Women Action Group Against Abuse (SWAGAA, swagaa.org.sz), a non-government organization trying to confront the issues of incest, rape and inequity. "More than 85 per cent of the violence happens at home," Dlamini told the Star at her Manzini office.

"It's not strangers. It's the people at home ... where the children are supposed to be safe." At the heart of the tragedies that Dlamini sees are cultural beliefs that thwart the efforts to fight HIV/AIDS.

Many Swazis retain beliefs in ancestral spirits (amadloti) and consult traditional healers (sangomas), who normalize cultural practices that put women and girls at high risk of HIV. Some Swazi men believe that having sex with a virgin will protect them from getting sick with AIDS or give them special powers. This drives some fathers to take their daughters' virginity when they are young, before another man rapes them, several Swazis told the Star. For others, a father raping his daughters is a family custom to secure a male heir to the homestead.

Most sexual assault victims that SWAGAA supports are children, and 90 per cent are victims of incest — usually by fathers, grandfathers or uncles, Dlamini said.

More than a third of Swazi women believe that rape is a normal part of being a woman, according to Vimbai Kapurura, director of Women Unlimited Eswatini.

“Sexual assault is a common family secret,” Joe Aryee said. “There is a stigma to reporting rape, disclosing HIV status and taking medication. If victims don't report sexual assaults, they aren't tested and the virus can progress quickly.”

Another contributing factor to the huge presence of HIV/AIDS is a widespread practice found in many cultures, including in North America: polygamy. Eswatini is ruled by totalitarian King Mswati, 55, who rose to power at age 14 and has married 15 women — so far. King Mswati's father, Sobhuza II, had more than 100 wives and 600 children.

An ancient tribal custom, polygamy is endorsed here for any man who can afford it. Tradition also permits a man to have a sexual relationship with his wife's younger sister.

Eswatini's Sexual Offences and Domestic Violence Act of 2018, was passed to combat Swazi cultural norms that perpetuate violence and discrimination against women. The act criminalized rape and child abuse in the country for the first time.

But the legislation is having little effect, Dlamini said, because it has failed to change the mindsets of police and judges. And many women who have reported abuse now live in fear of retaliation from their abusers.

Most Swazis live below the international poverty line. Women and children are forced to normalize sexual abuse because they have no other choice. To end these chains of unnecessary tragedies, “the country will need to address difficult questions of who we are and what we believe in,” she said.





Action for Swazi Kids in 2024

Service Trip with Brentwood College School, March 2024

26 students and 3 teachers arrived in March and we built our sixth structure at Emnotfweni Secondary School. I am so proud of the work done over the past eight years in building this entire school from a cow field to what it is now. We are graduating at least 30 students every year from grade 12 in an area that had NO school, NO high school students and certainly NO graduates. The whole area has upgraded with the addition of higher education. Credit must be given to Brentwood and to the Wheeler Family Foundation for funding this. It must also be given to Joe, our employee, for being our project manager too!

Watch clips from this trip:

- [Foundation work at Emnotfweni Secondary School](#)
- [Poijke dinner at the dam](#)
- [Re-visiting a tiny ancient lady who we help, called Dancing Gogo](#)
- [Dinner for 45 with older Swazi Kids students & Brentwood students](#)





Bright Stars Preschool

In April, six women joined me and we did a do-over of a new but incomplete preschool. The short list of accomplishments: colourfully painted the entire outside, installed and painted a lovely new playground and sandbox, distributed pile and piles of clothing, brought from Canada many amazing and high quality toys, planted 3 large indigenous trees. Left to do: paint inside, install electricity and running water, fencing and a garden. The women worked hard, laughed a lot and cried just a little. For more on these service trips, see details at the bottom of this newsletter.



Amalia- new director puts her touch on paint job
Danielle Burton, another great new director



Emphini Primary and Sigcweni High School

Both of these schools were in DIRE condition, with massive drop-offs in attendance and interest in their communities. In both cases, major upgrades were done: re-concreting floor, fixing cracks, replacing windows, doors and roofing, painting all over, including rooves, wall repair, new black boards, book shelves, new furniture and more. IN BOTH cases roughly 150 students have returned to school, who were previously either out of school or bussing a long distance to school. These sound like small things, but they are not!

Graduation Enhancement Program

New for 2023-24 this focuses on our graduating tertiary students. We have hired private consultants to work with a select few on: personal development, finding your own unique abilities, networking, CV writing and interview skills, personality profiles and much more. We will evaluate the hiring rate of this chosen group at the end to determine if this was money well spent or not. I suspect the gains will far outstrip the costs!



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Ways to Help Swazi Kids 2024

I wish to help out in the following way(s)
Please fill in the appropriate blanks

An elementary student is helped in various ways and \$200 per year goes a very long way, (but does not get them a new uniform):
I would like to help _____

5 text books for new library \$50 _____

10 novels for new library \$100 _____

Our secondary students need \$500-750 per year, this is due in large part to expensive exam fees and uniforms:
I would like to help _____

Help us with the new library, in increments of \$100

Uniform \$175 _____

Graduation Enhancement Program
\$350 will get one of our grads through this new program and onto employment

A new desk for the library \$50 _____

Use my funds as you see fit for Swazi Kids work:

METHODS OF DONATING

1. Using credit card or Paypal, directly from our website. If this is your method, cut and paste this URL address into your address bar on your search engine; <https://swazikids.net/donate> It will take you to our donate page, which is a self-serve method of easy payment using your credit card or Paypal
2. If sending via an e-transfer, please use email address: swazikids@gmail.com and use password: swazikids
3. Please make donation cheques payable to Swazi Kids Society and post the cheque along with this form

Swazi Kids Society
4531 Gaspardone Rd,
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Does a service trip to Eswatini interest you?

I guide groups ranging from 6-30 people in Eswatini. The trip can be quite customized to suit the group. Couples, singles, families, extended families, friends are all welcome. I have done this many times and can provide great contacts from happy previous travellers and testimonials. I know Eswatini like the back of my hand. The trips are usually 2 weeks long and include: service with children/building (no skills required), sight-seeing, hiking (all abilities accepted) and an amazing safari.

There is also a phenomenal music festival down here, called Bush-Fire. bush-fire.com and [facebook.com/MTNBUSHFIRE](https://www.facebook.com/MTNBUSHFIRE) and I look forward to bringing a group that could incorporate this! Costs range from about \$4,500-\$6,000 per person depending upon the level of safari, this does not include airfare.

Watch videos from the Bushfire festival:

[Video 1](#)

[Video 2](#)

[Video 3](#)

[Video 4](#)

[Video 5](#)



Contact me, Pam Carlson, for more information on my trips: Pambigdog3@gmail.com



Note that for liability reasons, my trips are run by a separate INC entity, called Jacaranda Journeys and although my connection is to Swazi Kids, the trips are not. However, we work on and view many of Swazi Kids projects and we engage with students younger and older from our program.