

# Changing the Culture of the Young Generation in Msunduzi, Swaziland: The Role of Women

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## The Location

It is 5:30 PM, just before sunset, and I am driving in my aunt's car up the steep hill to Msunduzi. My aunt is slowly swerving in all directions trying to avoid the gaping potholes scarring the narrow road which can barely squeeze two cars side-by-side. I roll down the front passenger seat window to catch conversations of those we pass by, the people on the sidewalk. Many of them are hauling their tired bodies up the merciless hill with plastic bags hanging from their hands, the women with baskets mounted on their heads. A familiar odor of sewerage starts to seep in. Looking ahead, I see traces of grey water oozing down the road and stashes of plastics and diapers trapped in the storm drains. A large overflowing dumpster<sup>1</sup> slowly comes into view positioned in the middle of the roundabout. My aunt parks the car next to the putrid waste container with a liquor and grocery store in front of us.


There it is on my first day back home, the main reason I was eager to get out of Msunduzi Township. Teenage boys ready to swindle anyone who walked past them for a few bucks to buy more alcohol. I quiver thinking to myself, this could have easily been you, a teenage boy waiting for his next high. That was not so long ago. I give a weary smile to the boys and move on. I am happy to be back in Msunduzi for the summer. After all, it is only temporary. In three months I will soon reminisce about it and its troubled youth over my in-flight meal on South African Airways, flying back to the American college I attend.

Still, Msunduzi, a township located in the African nation of Swaziland, is my home. A landlocked country within South Africa, Swaziland shares a border with Mozambique on its northeastern side. Four parallel climatic zones divide Swaziland into four distinctive regions. Mbabane is part of the Highveld which is the outermost region to the west of the country, and sits in a river valley enveloped by a belt of igneous rock mountains in an amphitheatre-like structure. Msunduzi overlooks the Central Business District of the city of Mbabane. Banks, shops and government headquarters are located in the city, making it an economic engine that lures people from rural areas.

What is home to me – Msunduzi – is also the largest and oldest slum in Mbabane,

holding a population of 16,000.<sup>2</sup> Locals know it as eKasi or eSkom, both of which mean “the location where presumably anything goes.” It is a place where unpleasant stereotypes prevail. One report describes us, the youth of Msunduzi, as “being without any commitment to responsible activity, and as a result, engage[d] in risky behaviours such as sexual intercourse, drug abuse and criminal offenses like house breaking and theft.”<sup>3</sup> Another study reports poverty (95 percent), unemployment (79 percent) and unsanitary living environment (42 percent) as the major challenges faced by the youth in the township.<sup>4</sup> These dire descriptions of Msunduzi suggest that a better way of life has receded from our youth's reach, that we are forever a doomed township. Yet, for some of us who were born in Msunduzi, we have not given up. We believe that there is a way to break away from Msunduzi's traps.

I arrived in Msunduzi this summer to intern with Municipal Council of Mbabane<sup>5</sup> (MCM) in their Environmental Health Services Department. I had originally assumed that tackling the environmental hazards that exist across Msunduzi – such as the waste dumps and dilapidated stick and mud houses – would fix our fundamental problems. Creating clean and healthy living spaces within the township would, I thought, bring back dignity to Msunduzi's living environment, enabling its dwellers to



start seeing themselves in a different light. The residents would see themselves as worthy human beings deserving of a life different from the usual hopeless life of a slum-dweller demonstrated by their current living situation.

However, as much as it is important to implement effective environmental programs in Msunduzi, the force that I discover has helped me rise above these traps is the role women can play in turning this society around. It is this realization that leads me to my research questions: What role do single-parent women play in changing the culture of the youth? How can single-parent women in Msunduzi transform the lives of the youth out of their constant struggle with poverty?

Here, I offer portraits of two women and through their lives explore the role of women in changing the culture of the youth in Swaziland's Msunduzi Township. First, my grandmother, whom I've determined was the catalyst that enabled me to escape the typical trappings that stagnate the lives of Msunduzi's youth. Grandmothers are increasingly becoming primary caregivers to their grandchildren in Swaziland, mainly due to HIV/AIDS. Then I portray Futhi, a single parent from Msunduzi, whom I met through my internship with MCM. She represents a new generation of young women juggling family gender roles trying to create a better future for her five boys and herself. Together, these two women exemplify one of the largest forces of hope that I believe exists for Msunduzi's next generation.

### **A tight regiment: my grandmother's broom**

I grew up in Msunduzi Township under my grandmother's care. She was the boss and I was the young employee. Contrary to the dotting grandmother stories I've heard from my college friends from the USA

my grandmother was a strict and serious woman. Chores and obedience were the main ingredients of my days. Get up: get the broom, sweep my room, eat, sweep the living area, go to school. Come back and do more chores, sweep some more, do some homework and finally go to sleep. This was my life on auto-pilot for 11 years under my grandmother's strict regiment in Msunduzi. I recall her orders and the broom, the latter like my grandmother herself.

The broom was simple, made from a bundle of dried straw. When I was ten years old, it was half my height. Though the broom could reach even the most hidden surfaces of the room with its flexible strands, it was quite a backbreaking tool and using it definitely exercised my spine each morning. The broom, just like my grandmother, quickly became the object of discipline in my life. A stern, unyielding and forever threatening stick in my childhood that made me behave.

Grandmothers in Msunduzi have become the flexible brooms that try to sweep away the dirt in the township. More and more, they are becoming primary caregivers in Swaziland, particularly among low income families.<sup>6</sup> The growing social, economic and environmental problems faced by poor families are forcing grandparents to become more responsible for their grandchildren when parents are unwilling or unable to care for them.<sup>7</sup> Some of the leading causes that ultimately assign grandparents this role include HIV/AIDS, drug abuse, imprisonment, child neglect, divorce, work, illness or death.

Without a social service department to take care of a child's welfare in cases of parental loss, most children find themselves under next of kin guardianship. Relatives within the structure of the extended family are expected to take care of the child according to traditional Swazi family culture. Grandparents are

an important component of Swaziland's traditional family culture, ensuring family continuity. Most importantly, literature reviewed by the World Bank on Indigenous Knowledge in development programs depicts grandmothers as intrinsic players in the well-being of women and their children in non-western societies like Swaziland.<sup>8</sup> Grandmothers often have an even larger and influential role to play in their extended families in childrearing, particularly in cases where the mother or father is not present because of work, sickness or death due to HIV/AIDS.<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, my paternal grandmother stepped up to play the role of a primary caregiver when my father passed away when I was ten. She offered to share the burden of childrearing with my mother: my grandmother raising me in Msunduzi and my mother raising my younger brother in the Lowveld.

Normally, in Swazi traditional families, the father's side of the family is responsible for the children. Children inherit their father's family name as well as the family traditions – even more so if the child is a boy, since he is expected to pass on the family name to another generation. Likewise, I was the first male born to my father. My grandmother took me in with some expectation that I would continue my father's legacy. The only problem was Msunduzi and the temptations that drowned its youth. She would make sure that I would not become another drug addicted school dropout. Just as she was happy to have me sweep my room every day, she was ready to sweep me away from the streets of Msunduzi and have me do endless chores and homework at home. Each morning when I refused to get out of bed at 5:30 am before school, she would wave the broom in my face screaming, "You want to waste your life sniffing glue and begging for 20 cents like the rest of the boys on the streets of Msunduzi?"



In low-income townships like Msunduzi, grandmothers are at the frontline of cleaning the streets from the youth. The major contributing factor in the rise of orphans in the country is HIV/AIDS, with the highest HIV prevalence rate in the world: 39.2 percent.<sup>10</sup> A significant portion of Swaziland's children has lost one or both of their parents. In 2010, Swaziland was projected to have 198,000 orphaned and other vulnerable children, 70,000 mainly due to AIDS related deaths.<sup>11</sup> Essentially, the HIV/AIDS pandemic has left many of these children without primary caregivers. The children lack parent figures who can provide for their needs until they become independent adults.

Though relatives in the extended family are expected to take care of the orphans, usually the grandmother is the only who is closest and willing to take responsibility for the child. The younger generation of parents (29 – 49 year olds) is dying of AIDS across the country.<sup>12</sup> A report in *The New York Times* reveals that many of the younger folk who still have the energy to take care of children have left their extended families in search for jobs in Swaziland's major cities and the neighboring South Africa.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, a lot of old women and children are left behind to survive on their own. In 2004, the percentage of children living with grandparents was estimated at 21.4 and was expected to go up with an increase in the HIV prevalence.<sup>14</sup> Throughout Swaziland, 40 percent of households host orphans and other vulnerable children.<sup>15</sup> Most of these houses are headed by grandparents and in some cases, children share the role.

The rampant poverty on the streets of Msunduzi was the reason my grandmother led her household in a "tight regiment." People migrate to Msunduzi from rural areas in search for jobs and a better life.<sup>16</sup> Yet, most people in Msunduzi are

unemployed. More often, for slum-dweller families, the relatives are unable to take care of the children because they are likely to be experiencing poverty themselves. Besides their lack of skills to perform in the formal job market in the city of Mbabane, they also face high unemployment rates within the urban area. The *Times of Swaziland* reported urban unemployment to be 23.6 percent in 2010 among the formally trained labor force.<sup>17</sup> Youth unemployment (ages 15-24) was estimated to be three times higher than all other age groups. For the rural-urban migrant, these conditions make it even harder to find decent employment in the city. A survey of residents from Msunduzi in 2005 revealed that in some cases, the income of one working person has to support a large family of nine to 12 people.<sup>18</sup>

My grandmother's household consisted of 11 people, five of whom were grandchildren. Despite her job as a primary school teacher, the large family size was a major source of financial and emotional hardship. Having lost her firstborn, my dad, she could not get time to grieve. She had to pick up the pieces of our broken family and take care of us. She had to work hard to provide food, shelter and school for me. If not, I would end up in the street of Msunduzi begging for a way to meet my basic needs. Of the rural-urban migrants in Msunduzi who cannot find a job, a large number of them end up on the streets with no money for food.<sup>19</sup>

The constant chores she imposed on me were her solution to shelter me from Msunduzi and enforce discipline in my life. In her household, for example, taking a nap during the day was a serious offense, devised out of tough love. When I was unfortunate enough to be caught in the act she would shake me awake, guilt tripping me with her legendary quote,

"There is no man in my house that can sleep in the middle of the day when the lord has blessed us with work and a beautiful day. Are you sick? You want to blame me in the peace of my grave for not teaching you right?"

My grandmother was no stranger to tough love. She was raised under the fierce hand of her aunt, and had to fight adversities to earn her education. Just like me, she grew up in Msunduzi, but at a time when it was much less developed. The streets were all gravel roads and much of Msunduzi was covered in forests that were used for firewood. Her family lived in a stick and mud house with a thatched roof. Without electricity, she woke up at the crack of dawn to make fire to boil water and cook breakfast. She expended so much energy each morning, gathering wood, making a fire, preparing breakfast for the whole family only to share a plate of sugarless soft sorghum porridge with four her other cousins.

Her male cousins were her constant source of distress. Scooping large amounts of the porridge, they would wipe out the plate in a few seconds. She would be lucky if she managed to get three or four spoonfuls out of the meal. Most of all,

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she also endured the power of the broom, sweeping her aunt’s backyard each morning, only to come back from school to more heaps of rubbish waiting for her, delivered by the unsympathetic wind. The harsh living conditions developed her thick skin and were responsible for her success in school, she would tell me while ordering me to finish every bit of food on my plate. “You are lucky to even have your own plate” she would attest. “I am preparing you to be a person of substance in the future,” she would say. She learned to transform her frustrations to a form of resilience, and would pass that resilience on to me to resist the traps of Msunduzi.

Grandmothers have a wealth of knowledge that can prepare children for their future. Studies show that grandmothers are often revered as beacons of knowledge and inspiration by many in their families.<sup>20</sup> They can do this because they are in a position to set standards and goals for their grandchildren. Each traditional Swazi home has a house allocated as

a “grandma’s house” where all family problems are discussed and resolved. The grandmother is considered to be someone who bears profound knowledge on the well-being of her family, knowledge passed on to her by her grandmothers. She often acts as the mediator in family disputes, and children run to her to seek refuge when their parents discipline them. Her age is a symbol of wisdom and her gender as an older woman in the society stands for her infinite ability to nurture her family and community in all situations. In Swaziland, the elderly are respected individuals who pass on the wise traditions of the past. Swaziland Positive Living, a non-governmental organization for people living with HIV, depicts grandmothers as “heroes” in their briefing on a summit in 2010 that focused on the impact of HIV/AIDS on grandmother’s lives.<sup>21</sup> The organization holds grandmothers as an invaluable component of the society because they “always play an important role in solving disputes and as a source of knowledge ... they are holding together the social fabric of communities across the continent.”<sup>22</sup>

Given that my grandmother was literate, I had an added advantage as a teenager growing up in Msunduzi. The literacy rate for female adults 15 and older is 85.6, percent compared to 87.4 percent in adult males 15 and older.<sup>23</sup> She was able to be a more effective role model or catalyst in changing my path as youth of Msunduzi by emphasizing education as my only key to success. According to Jonasi’s study on grandmothers as role models in Malawi, illiterate grandmothers are limited in their effectiveness as role models for their grandchildren because they are not as conversant with the structures of the modern world.<sup>24</sup> When they have no education, the degree to which they can emphasize the need for education for their grandchildren is limited.<sup>25</sup>

Literate or not, grandmothers play a significant role as caregivers. They have at their disposal useful cultural values and practices to pass on to younger generations.<sup>26</sup> These values can shed light on how to break the cycle of poverty between generations, especially among the youth.

### **A young mother and the youth at her disposal**

Futhi is short for Ntombifuthi, which means “another girl.” This is a name common among Swazi girls. In a traditional Swazi home, boys are valued more highly than girls.<sup>27</sup> Sons carry and pass on the family name, whereas daughters marry into another family. For Futhi being “another girl” systematically limited the opportunities she could have to improve her life. As a young girl, she was excluded from receiving a full education, which ultimately drove her into a life of childrearing. Futhi, who has just turned 30, is already a mother to five children, whom she has to raise as slum-dwellers in Msunduzi.

The hierarchical family system that gives rise to egregious biases against women is a phenomenon common in African countries as well as in other developing nations around the globe. Kevane, in his book “Women and Development in Africa: How Gender Works,” describes boys as ranking higher than girls in the family hierarchy regardless of age.<sup>28</sup> Men and women lead gendered lives and make different choices because they are presented with different opportunities.<sup>29</sup> There are cultural expectations that limit the choices that women like Futhi can make to develop and enjoy their lives. The role of the woman as a mother and wife in the African traditional family is a gendered controlling “the space of feasible action” that the African woman can take.<sup>30</sup> It shapes her choices and obligations within the family and the rest of society. In





a way, her gender and her sexuality are not hers to own and to enjoy. The women's sexual acts are bundled in most cases with rights and obligations to care for children.<sup>31</sup> Young mothers like Futhi have to build the courage to sieve through their gendered roles to make decision on the changes they need to make to balance their lives for the better.

Futhi is my newly acquired friend and co-worker at MCM. I see her three or four times each week either at tea-break or in departmental meetings. Like many young mothers, she is trying to secure a better future for her five children in the face of poverty. Whilst juggling family roles, Futhi has to ensure that she puts her five boys through school so they can have a brighter future. In the past three years, Futhi has decided to earn her living by collecting waste on the streets of Mbabane, including Msunduzu. Waste collection is a career that is looked down upon. People in Mbabane do not see value in waste because many of them want to be hired into an office job in one of the emerging skyscrapers in the city, a reality only possible for a handful. In order to provide food for her household, Futhi has put pride aside and actively searches the streets of Mbabane for any waste that she recover to generate income. Waste collection is Futhi's first step in climbing the ladder out of poverty. Her decision to join MCM's Waste Recycling and Reuse Project is one way she can take responsibility for her kids and not give them up to perish on the streets of Msunduzu.

On a cold Monday morning in May, during the Southern Hemisphere's autumn, Futhi and I are in the office enjoying a quick coffee break. I sit behind my desk staring up at her thick lips moving in slight tremor complaining about chilling temperatures outside she has just escaped. Below her chin, her hands are tightly gripped on the warm coffee mug, with traces of steam

spirals slowly warming her face. Futhi wears a white scarf neatly tied in a bun on the back of her head. I sip my cup of tea transfixed on her round face noticing the sharp contrast of the white cloth against her dark African skin tone. Her darkened and dry, flaky skin is a testament to the hard work she endures in the bitter morning cold, rummaging the streets of Mbabane for any waste that can be recycled.

It is customary for women, particularly older women, to cover their heads as a sign of respect to their children and community. By wearing a headscarf, women assume their role in society as mothers. As a woman with five children depending on her on a daily basis, the mother role is probably one that Futhi can't easily separate between work and home. Without a headscarf, she would probably have to pay for an expensive hairstyle to make herself presentable at work. For a woman like Futhi, struggling to meet her children's needs, the headscarf is the cheapest and most sensible solution to dress in public.

African rural women are the poorest of the poor and experience poverty and inequality differently to men.<sup>32</sup> The lack of access to resources coupled with unequal rights in family structures make women not only poorer in their families but also in the broader society.<sup>33</sup> For women this translates to limited access to education and training skills, which further exacerbates life below the poverty line.<sup>34</sup> Futhi, like many women in Msunduzu, lives with limited access to clean water and electricity. Poor sanitation becomes a health and safety hazard. Add five children to the already loaded equation of multiple responsibilities women have to juggle and the situation becomes dire.

As Futhi leans forward to pour herself another cup of coffee I find myself

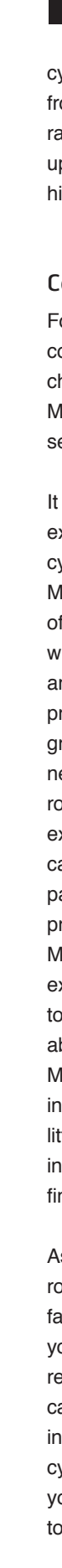
transfixed by her welcoming round face and soft brown eyes. With her rough and cracked hand, Futhi pours herself the cup. She smiles back at me noticing my apparent my fascination. Her smile gives me courage to ask what I've bottled up ever since I started learning about her life. My curiosity pours out of me:

"Five children is a lot to manage, especially in Msunduzu. What will you do when MCM cuts all funding to the recycling and reuse project? How will you and your boys survive?"<sup>35</sup> My intrusive questions do not faze her. She smiles back at me and in an assuring motherly voice says,

"Only God can help us. God takes care of His children. He will fight our battles. In the meantime, I have to make sure that I can sell enough waste to make money to feed my kids. I have to be on the streets for my kids."<sup>36</sup>

The burden of the grinding poverty of low-income communities falls substantially on women and their children. Without an education, Futhi is restricted in her capacity to provide a better standard of living for her family. Her lack of proper skills means she cannot get a well-paying job. With no source of income, she is stuck with her children in the vicious poverty

"Five children is a lot to manage, especially in Msunduzu. What will you do when MCM cuts all funding to the recycling and reuse project? How will you and your boys survive?" My intrusive questions do not faze her.



cycle of a slum-dweller. By breaking away from the gendered roles that suppress rather than empower, women can open up opportunities that can bump life a level higher from hopeless poverty.

## Conclusion

For the youth living in poor developing countries like Swaziland, life is hard and challenging. Growing up in a slum like Msunduzi, where the fate of the youth is sealed before birth, is even more testing.

It sometimes takes the eye of an old experienced woman to break the vicious cycle of poverty that traps the youth of Msunduzi in risky behaviors. A mother of two generations like my grandmother who has witnessed her own struggle and her children's struggles is crucial in preventing the same suffering among her grandchildren. The youth of Msunduzi need grandmothers who can identify the roots of the generational problems that exist within their families. In doing so they can put the new generation on a new path free from drugs, unwanted teenage pregnancies and dropping out of school. My grandmother was able to tap into her experience and see that I would need tough love and strong discipline to rise above the stereotypes of the youth from Msunduzi. She brought structure in my life in a community where teenagers lived with little or no structure, and ultimately put me in line to receive an education as well as find purpose in my life.

As a young mother, Futhi has a major role to play in raising her boys. She is not far removed from the experiences of her young children and can in some ways relate to them more than grandmothers can relate to their grandchildren. Therefore, in order to break the persistent poverty cycle and negative stereotypes of the youth in Msunduzi, young mothers have to realign their family gender roles to

better serve new generation of youngsters in Msunduzi. Futhi's courage to get out of her house and work collecting waste in the streets of Mbabane is an example of the change young mothers can model for their children. Through the changes in her life, Futhi becomes a positive role model to those of the young generation of Msunduzi, who often surrender their lives to poverty and drug addiction. If a mother can fight her way out of poverty and put her children through school with a limited income from recycling waste, the youth of Msunduzi can definitely do it too. Futhi's teenage boys have to acknowledge and appreciate the sacrifice she is making to get them a decent education. The sacrifices made by the women in our lives so that we can get an education as the youth of Msunduzi should not be taken lightly. Teenagers have to learn from Futhi's example and realize that having made mistakes such as teenage pregnancy does not warrant giving up. Even though she has five children she has to work extremely hard to provide for, Futhi has decided to take responsibility for her actions. The rest of the youth in Msunduzi should follow suit.

Together, they have given me the ability to see that one way to improve the lives of the youth is to improve the living conditions of women in society, particularly those raising children on their own. Be it in or outside of the home they interact with the youth on many fundamental levels, making sure that the basic needs of the youth are met. By improving the social, economic and environmental spaces in which women live, a larger share of the young generation is likely to reap the same benefits. They share their living spaces with their children in poverty and in wealth. Women often do not hesitate to assume these challenging tasks because in every teenager from Msunduzi they see their own child. When they assume these difficult roles in childrearing, women like my grandmother

and Futhi make an invaluable contribution to the village it takes to raise a child.

Further research should analyze the role of the community in producing an environment that is conducive for youth to thrive. More research should explore if there are any significant differences in benefits that the youth get from older and younger female primary caregivers, and how the conditions for each category of caregiver can be improved to benefit the younger generation.

What is the correlation between improving women's welfare and environmental issues with the well-being of the youth? What is the community's role in ensuring that a mother's cry for help to secure a better future for her teenagers is heard? What tools need to be in place to enable women to become leaders in their communities in reducing poverty reduction for themselves and the youth?

Addressing these fundamental problems, focused on creating healthy and safe living spaces for youth and their primary caregivers, particularly in low-income neighborhoods, is critical to overcoming the vicious cycle of poverty.

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## Notes

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