

Bridging the gender gap

By Karen Allen BBC News, Lesotho



Girls are given football training to raise their self-esteem

Lesotho sits like pearl in a shell, surrounded by the land mass of South Africa. But this tiny kingdom of 1.8 million people boasts another jewel, which is perhaps astonishing given its size.

Lesotho is ranked eighth in the world by the World Economic Forum (WEF) when it comes to bridging the gap between the sexes.

The reasons are cultural, political and economic, but one explanation keeps being repeated when you probe the gender issue, and it relates to Lesotho's recent past.

Historically, large numbers of men from Lesotho crossed the border to work in South Africa's mines, forcing women to step into their shoes and take up school places and jobs.

Many of the men have now come back, having been retrenched from the mines, and they face a more female-focused world.

In politics, one in five government ministers in Lesotho is female.

Dr Mphu Ramatlapeng, Lesotho's minister for health and social affairs, attributes this to the government's pro-women policies.

But more than that, she emphasises Lesotho's culture of learning.

"The defining factor is education. I think a lot of women have realised early on that they have to educate their daughters," she says.

WEF Global Gender Gap 2010 Ranking

1. Iceland
2. Norway
3. Finland
4. Sweden
5. New Zealand
6. Ireland
7. Denmark
8. Lesotho
9. Philippines
10. Switzerland

High literacy rates

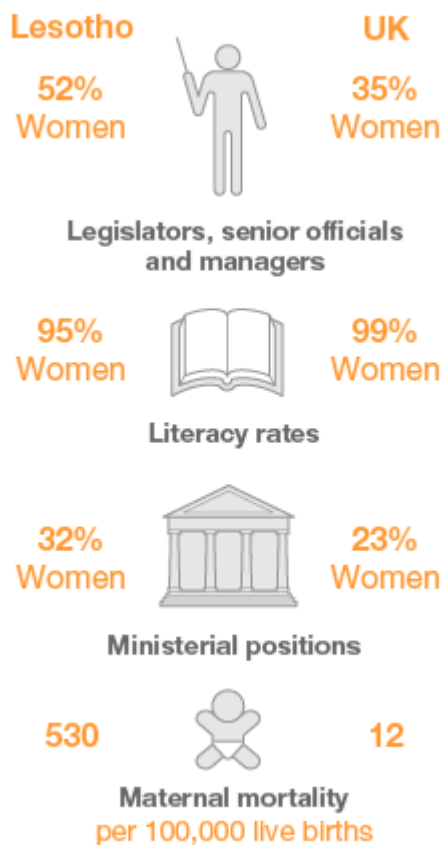
Primary education is free in Lesotho and literacy rates among women exceed those of men - with 95% of women able to read and write, compared with 83% of men.

This is filtering into the jobs market - the chief of police is a woman, so too is the speaker of parliament and there are at least a dozen senior female judges presiding over the country's courts.

These women are the role models plucked from Lesotho's elite, but unemployment stands at 43% and, for more regular jobs, competition remains fierce.

Although 40,000 women make up most of the workforce in the energetic textile sector situated in the industrial hub of the capital, Maseru, many more risk being confined to the sidelines, as men who traditionally worked in the mines across the border look for work.

Women in Lesotho and UK compared



Source: Global Gender Gap Report 2010/World Bank

What also threatens to slide women back is the act of reproducing.

Lesotho has experienced a soaring maternal mortality rate in the past five years - a trend that the minister attributes in part to a rise in back-street abortions and complications in pregnancy. With mountains often separating a woman from medical care, Dr Ramatlapeng's mission is to persuade more women to come to hospital for help throughout their pregnancy.

"They're prepared to visit to have their health check ups," she says. "It's just convincing them to deliver their babies in hospital that is harder."

Self-esteem

Across the other side of town, Lash Mokhathi, who coaches a women's football team, smirks when she hears that Lesotho is ranked first in Africa for bridging the gender gap and eighth in the entire world.

Like many here she finds the figures hard to believe. "We need to boost women's self-esteem," she says explaining that is what the football training is all about.

The football project, which works with an HIV prevention scheme called Kick for Life, aims to divert vulnerable young women away from drugs, prostitution and street crime.

On the pitch, the roles seem strangely reversed. Young women, some in football gear that looks several sizes too big, scream with excitement every time a goal is scored, while a team of male cheerleaders stands on the sidelines singing songs of encouragement.



[Dr Ramatlheng \(centre\) says there is a big focus on educating girls](#)

But life beyond the football pitch is still hard for Lesotho's women, complains Lash.

"It's not just the men that are holding women back, it is also the mothers," she says. She explains that they worry that men will be displaced by "over-ambitious" women.

"We are not here to pose a threat," she says. "I want to see more women engineers, more women construction workers, a political party run by a woman - then I will say that Lesotho has achieved equality."

Fifty per cent of Lesotho's population live in the rural areas. Until recently, customary laws applied in the countryside dictated that women were virtually redundant when it came to making key decisions in the home.

"Until the marriage act was passed, a woman had the legal status of a minor," explains Ahunna Eziakonwa-Onochie, the UN's resident co-ordinator in Lesotho.

That meant she could not sign contracts, could not inherit property and was, in effect, treated as a child.

Raw deal

The rules may have changed, but 79-year-old widow Teresia Joele says that she still needs a male patron. "You need a man to look after you here. My husband died in 1962 and so I have relied on his brothers to look after my interests," she says.



Women in rural areas used to have the same legal rights as minors

Like thousands of other women her age, Mrs Joele is part of an army of unsung heroes - the women who raise their grandchildren because their parents have died of HIV/Aids. Some 23% of Lesotho's population is infected with the disease, and it threatens to erode the gains made in female education.

"I can't afford to send my granddaughter Dironstso to school even though I know it is the best thing I could give her," Mrs Joele says. At 13, the child does not qualify for free education, and there are also books and school uniform to pay for.

The statistics that put Lesotho at the top table in the equality game may look impressive but they risk glossing over the challenges. There may be less of a gap in health, education and political participation than in many other countries, and clearly there is greater political will to recognise the important role of women in society.

But the perceptions of many women living their daily lives in Lesotho, is that they still get a raw deal