

eSwatini MP proposes arresting underage children to curb teen pregnancy

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A lawmaker in eSwatini has proposed jail time for underage children as a way to curb teenage pregnancy in the kingdom formerly known as Swaziland, gripped by poverty and a high HIV burden.

"It is my personal opinion that one way to curb [teenage pregnancy](#) in the country could be arresting the underage children involved," Michael Masuku said Thursday during a workshop hosted in parliament.

"So arresting them would discourage and scare them from engaging in teenage sex," the MP said.

Masuku said teenage [pregnancy](#) should be a punishable offence for both boys and girls engaging in sexual activity.

Adding that incarceration for at least one year would "preserve their virginity and instill good morals", because "they get pregnant even at primary school level," he added.

According to the director in the Gender Department, Jane Mkhonta, there are 1,046 girls each year who drop out of school due to teenage pregnancy.

Children in eSwatini have also been hard hit by a high HIV prevalence with an estimated 44,000 children orphaned by HIV/AIDS by 2017.

About 3,500 people died from the disease in that year, from a peak of 7,900 in 2005.

Although according to UNAIDS, new HIV infections have halved in the landlocked country since 2010 and AIDS-related deaths are down 28 percent—thanks to government intervention—Masuku bemoaned that school children were "not using even condoms which are accessible in many places in communities."

The lawmaker's comments invited the fury of social media users with some questioning the education level of the lawmaker. Others cautioned that the implementation of such measures would encourage dangerous backstreet abortions.

"Arrest? Some of our MPs are truly a joke," a Facebook post said.

The kingdom of eSwatini is ruled by a playboy king with 14 wives, more than 25 children and the right to choose a new one at the annual Reed Dance, when thousands of bare-breasted virgins dance for him.

The reed dance, believed to be encouraging young girls to preserve their virginity, is actively promoted in communities.

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