

how we feel

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Daughters: A Woman in a Mans World

In the first chapter of an ongoing series revealing the threads that unite women from all corners of the African continent, we travel to Swaziland to meet five indomitable spirits. Swazi Lowveld community development strategist, Gugulethu Hlophe, spends her waking hours balancing the needs of the two things closest to her heart: her projects, and her only son.

Photographs: Pippa Hetherington | **Words:** Kim Chaloner



'Happiness to me is worth more than money. It's in all the simple things, it's in love,' says rural Swaziland community development strategist and Queen Communicator, Gugulethu Hlophe. 'When I haven't been at work for a week everyone says, "We missed your love".'

We first made contact with Gugulethu Hlophe — Strategy and Corporate Communications Manager for parastatal SWADE, Swaziland’s Water and Agricultural Development Enterprise – while researching (remotely) the Kingdom’s transboundary water-sharing agreement with South Africa during pre-production for the Bridging Waters documentary series (Pippa was producer, I was researcher-scriptwriter). An impassioned advocate for change in the Swazi Lowveld, where she helps facilitate an improvement in the living conditions and farming prospects of rural agricultural communities, spending time with Gugulethu was one of our reasons for travelling to Swaziland once our doccic project wound up. ‘Lethu’ as we have come to know her is a beautiful person accomplishing significant things both as an individual and as part of a respected team. For a couple of days, while commandeering a vehicle with us as passengers, going out of her way to reveal the countryside, the agricultural projects and the people she loves, this Queen Communicator spoke from the heart about her personal and professional challenges, and her affinity for very fast cars...



I love what I do. It gives me such insight, and an outlet to change people’s lives within the organisation and in a lot of communities.

Growing up, I never imagined that I’d end up facilitating change in this way. At school I was always channelled to maths, science, biology and chemistry. You could count on one hand the girls taking these classes. All my life I was in position one. God was good in that respect, but in truth I was very unhappy. I know now it is human behaviour that always fascinated me. In deciding what I really wanted to do – from being a doctor to a psychologist – I think I changed my mind ten times. In retrospect, all vocations had something to do with helping someone to realise their potential. Now that I’m in this field, I feel like I am where I’ve always wanted to be.

This job requires an understanding of human behaviour, interpersonal skills – and a sense of intuition, an ability to follow your gut. When you’re working with people in rural communities, a lot is said in the things that are not said, in body language. So I’m always constantly reading situations and peoples’ expressions to see whether things are okay.



The approach is more socially orientated and more creative. It's not like following a recipe. It's all in how you see it, in what you need to expose and the issues you need teased out, and how you address them. It requires a lot of diplomacy, and a very keen understanding of culture and the role of women in it. If you make the mistake of not understanding the cultural aspect you've lost the community. It's very intricate.

Working in a rural community is paternalistic, male dominated. When a man stands up and addresses a community, everyone makes a point of attending, even the men. With a woman, it's slower because there are a lot of things you have to go through first, tests almost. But when you've earned the community's trust it's more sustainable and long-lasting. A man's approach is more immediate, more commanding of attention. But for a woman like me, working with the Chief is where the understanding of culture comes in. As a woman addressing the community I don't stand, I kneel. What you are saying is, "With your permission I will present this way."

I'll always find the women sitting to one side on the floor, and the men on chairs or benches or anything that elevates them. That's why women wear kangas [wraparound sarongs worn over their clothing], which can be placed on the ground, and sat on. That's just one of the unknown tests: if you follow all the other guys from the office and sit on the bench you'll stir thoughts of, "Okay, this one doesn't know how to talk to us."

So, you would think that it's a disadvantage to be a woman as a social facilitator, but actually it's got more long-term benefits. It's harder to earn the status, but when you have it you are regarded as part of the family. You know you've arrived when the Chief starts recognising you, and speaking to you about another issue, and asking for your advice.

Being an African woman in 2010 is certainly better in some ways than in my mother's time, but it's also more complicated. Then women were just expected to be at home and raise the kids. And it was slower; you had the chance to nurture your kids. But I also like the opportunities that are available now. I think I would have been thoroughly frustrated if I was stuck in a relationship that wasn't going anywhere. I find pretending very difficult. I probably would have been sent out of the community 40 years ago!

Now, as a single mom, who is also working and studying, a good support system is essential. It's about learning to let go; about empowering yourself and others so that you're not overstretched. I have had to make peace with it. That is what's keeping me sane. That and the stress-management workshop I attended recently, 'Put it in a box if you can't do anything about it and keep the lid closed.' Accept that you can only do so much. You know, being Superwoman... it doesn't exist. She's tired, you know.

There was no ceremony that marked my transition into womanhood, but there are events that happened in my life where I thought, "Okay, now this is me, a woman in a man's world". That, and having a child. It is brilliant and intense when you realise your responsibility as a mother. It's a bittersweet moment.

I was also brought up by a mum, who raised five kids single-handedly. I've got one. I mean, how did she do it? It's those little everyday events where you need to somehow split yourself in three; you're prepping a report and you're late for a soccer match. I think my life's philosophy is probably unconsciously based on trying not to repeat my mother's mistakes. She has a quieter strength than me. I'm not afraid to say what I will, and what I'll never do, in this lifetime. My mother remained in a relationship that wasn't really a relationship... She wasn't willing to get divorced, she believes marriage is for life. And me, I battled with the idea of divorce. My son was three... For me it's more black or white, I don't handle grey very well. When I went to see the [divorce] lawyer he said to me, "You're 29 and you're actually saying you want a divorce? Do you know what that means in Swaziland?" and I said to him "Not really, but I know what it means to me, and if you're not going to help me you're just making things more difficult." In Swaziland, in a traditional marriage, it's not the woman who asks for the divorce, but the man... and then only on grounds of adultery or witchcraft. So essentially you are governed by, and tied to a man, for life. If it's not your father then it's your husband.

Now I'm looking for a man who is supportive, who understands what it means to be a partner. So if that means I'm looking for a phantom then I'll just have to be single forever! I'm not prepared to compromise. And it's in this way that I'm raising my son. I believe I'm helping him to grow, to be independent, to stand up for himself. I wish more children were treated that way, especially girls. You won't stay in an abusive relationship if you know yourself well.

Happiness to me is worth more than money. It's in all the simple things, it's in love. When I haven't been at work for a week, everyone says, "we missed your love."

I feel I don't fit in anywhere, but I don't need that... I like being unique. My son and I, we love the same things... watching comedies on the BBC, music, cars. I'd love a Porsche Cayenne or a Ferrari...low profile and in red. I love the sound of cars that give you power, where you can take the corner at 200km/h and still stay on the road. And motorbikes. I'll have one before I die even if it kills me, at least it would be instant.

Some years ago I fell in love with Vancouver Island in Canada. I was asked if I'd be interested to move there as my skills are so sought-after, but I said: "You know honey, there's still so much to do in Swaziland." Leaving would be taking away my ability to help. I feel like I have to try and make a dent wherever I can in my lifetime.