



water & sanitation

Department:
Water and Sanitation
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

**ADDRESS BY Ms. NOMVULA MOKONYANE, MINISTER OF WATER AND
SANITATION AT THE 12th STANDARD BANK TOP WOMEN AWARDS HELD
AT THE EMPEROR'S PALACE.**

6 AUGUST, 2015

Ursula Chikane, Master of Ceremonies

Ethel Nyembe, Standard Bank Head of Small Enterprise

Karla Fletcher, Director, Topco Media

Sponsors of the various Awards categories

Ladies and Gentlemen

Comrades and Friend

Today, the 6th of August, during the Women's Month, we celebrate the 12th episode of a very important event – the Standard Bank Top Women Awards. This event, in more than one way, serves as a prelude to the 59th anniversary celebration of the Women Day on the 9th of August.

This awards ceremony is increasingly becoming a key component in the drive towards defining the inner-soul of who we are and what we stand for as women of this great country of ours, South Africa.

The women in South Africa have for a very long time been part and parcel of the struggle for the emancipation of our people from colonialism and apartheid. And have, to a large degree, also acted as purveyors of the hope and optimism of the masses of the people through the various forms of struggles and triumphs.

It was really humbling to have been requested by the event organisers to speak about “my own journey”. At the outset I need to say that whilst I may be in a position to do so adequately, I have to say that as a young girl growing up in the dusty streets of Kagiso, in the West Rand, I came to understand that “my own journey” was inextricably linked to the daily struggles of our people.

I got initiated into the struggle at a very tender age of 15, and that did not happen out of choice; but both the subjective and objective conditions imposed themselves upon me to join the struggle. I could not sit idle by while my people endured the hardship of deprivation and apartheid bigotry.

Looking back at my own earlier development, up to where I am at present, there are a number of people, especially women political stalwarts, who impacted my life either as mentors or through their selflessness that inspired me to emulate them.

These women include Mama Albertina Sisulu, Helen Josephs, Mam' Bertha Gxowa, Amina Cachalia, Mme Ruth Mompati amongst the many heroines of the struggle. These are true revolutionaries who were prepared to lay down their lives for the emancipation of their people. And were leaders in their own right.

These are women who taught me to work within the collective. Thus every victory that could be attributed to me came about because I believed in working within the collective

Programme Director,

History is an important pathway toward understanding where we come from in order to garner more strength to move forward. Indeed, the gender activists of today need to know that there are others who came before them and that they do not have to reinvent the wheel, but rather carry the baton to move gender advocacy and empowerment to greater heights.

We are all aware that these are now new times and the emphases of our struggle are somewhat different. Today, we have to grapple head-on with the challenges of poverty, unemployment and inequality. Not that these challenges never existed before, but rather that the new democratic dispensation has put these at the centre of its policy articulation within the notion of a developmental state.

The historical position of women has for many years been the one of subservience. Women have, for far too long, been viewed as servant of a system of patriarchy which has tended to dehumanise them and never

accorded them the status they deserve as equal participants in all strata of society.

And here, we dare say, that there is nothing that embodies the triumphs and tribulations of women more succinctly than the power of women to rise against all odds despite of all kinds of adversity they are confronted with.

The aura of this occasion, today, propels me to offer you the taste of Maya Angelou's poem, as an affirmation of the power of women to rise:

*You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise*

*You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with you hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise.*

The poignancy of the poem is there for all to feel and to marvel at. All the women who have been nominated in the various categories deserve the accolades, because they are the ones who said they will not be pulled down, whether by other women, men or society, but will rise up. We honour all of them.

Various categories of awards will be covered tonight, ranging from Diversity in Workplace, Investing in People, Corporate Citizenship, Engineering and a host of others disciplines. There will also be Individual, Government and

Headline awards on offer. Let us sit, relax and savour the moment of pure inspiration, excellence and joy.

Once the Awards are over and done with and we all go to our respective areas of responsibilities, we need to carry with us tonight's message that says hard work pays off.

In our small ways let us all find mechanism to support those that need our help for them to reach greater heights of entrepreneurial excellence and patriotism.

This Awards ceremony should also help make us focus on the key ingredients of social cohesion and nation-building and how to make a meaningful contribution towards the transformation of South Africa in becoming a truly non-racial, non-sexist, just and prosperous country.

I wish to reaffirm the view that there is no vehicle more capable of bringing about effective social cohesion and nation-building, with vigour and efficacy, than building the human capital and entrepreneurial prowess. If we are to consolidate the gains of our democratic dispensation we need to open up spaces for such interactions to take place and flourish to their full glory.

We should also cast our minds back to 1994 and remind ourselves of some of the significant strides and achievements we have made since the dawn of our democracy in relation to gender equality and women empowerment. We should continue to identify the areas where the struggle for gender equality and women empowerment needs to be intensified.

These achievements have been made in many areas such as the representation of women in the legislature and in government, in education and health care; in improving safety and in women's access to economic opportunities and in improving access to basic services and housing to mention but a few.

However, there is still a lot to be done. Women today continue to face many challenges such as gender-based violence, inequality, unemployment and poverty. As we celebrate Women's Month we should build on our achievements to address these issues and further strengthen women's empowerment.

Last but not least, we should focus on celebrating our proud heritage of women's struggle in our country and honoring our women heroines. This includes the women's 1913 anti-pass protests in the Free State, the historic 1956 women's march in Pretoria and many other women's struggles which helped bring apartheid to an end and lay the basis for democracy. The political and social consciousness that they have built was bestowed upon all of us to pursue; and this is even more pertinent to the young women of 2015.

While the opportunities available to women have improved significantly since the dawn of democracy, women continue to face marginalization and discrimination by virtue of their gender.

Some of the social norms in our society are such that women are less valued and have less power and authority than their male counterparts. Gender oppression occurs across our society, including in the family, relationships, education, in the workplace and in economic, political and religious life.

Both Boy and Girl children are born into this system of patriarchy and are socialized into it. Some forms of discrimination against women – particularly gender based violence – are quite obvious. Other forms of discrimination are more subtle – like a woman being overlooked for promotion in favour of a less competent male colleague.

Young women are particularly vulnerable to discrimination and overt forms of abuse such as gender-based violence. This compounds the developmental challenges that they face, such as unemployment, poverty and inequality and a lack of access to skills and economic opportunities.

Consequently, many young women often become casualties and “victims” as they make choices that are detrimental to their development. Some become mothers at an early age and remain perpetually dependent on the child support grant, limiting their opportunities for growth and becoming trapped in a vicious cycle of poverty.

Others define themselves purely on the basis of their physical appearance and become “trophy girls” or sex objects in return for material gain. Some enter into relationships with older men (sugar daddies) and others engage in transactional sex for survival.

In child headed households, it is often young women who take on the responsibilities of caring for their siblings.

In an oblique manner, the advancement of some women in our society has also had unintended consequences. More successful black women are now living in affluent suburbs far from their original communities where they need to be active and visible for young women to identify them as role models.

The participation of young women in political and social movements for the promotion of the youth development has lost momentum as young women are not visible in big numbers at such platforms. Young women who are activists and leaders in their own right are becoming a thing of the past. This trend must be arrested.

Programme Director,

With regards to issues of water, the biggest challenge is access, especially for the unserved rural communities.

The African Union has declared 2015 as the Year of Women Empowerment and Development Towards Africa's Agenda 2063. The overarching objective of the "Year of Women Empowerment" is to define strategic actions to fully support women capacity-building and access to resources in order to ensure their full participation in the political and economic decision-making processes.

The Department of Water and Sanitation has therefore planned an aggressive approach to women empowerment to ensure that women are empowered in a meaningful way.

This will be carried out in a manner that ensures that women's participation in economic development and growth is enhanced through capacity-building and education, including through access and control of resources as well as information and technology.

Women entrepreneurs, specifically those in the engineering and construction fields will be incubated and mentored for three years by the big companies that are well established and doing business with the Department. We are convinced that this effort, if properly executed, will enhance capacity and commitment of women to new innovative ideas with high impact.

Let me conclude by saying that the challenges of gender equality and women empowerment should be the preoccupation of all of us in the society.

Dankie

Ngiyabonga