

**Women's Day Celebration**  
**Keynote Address by Ms B Sonjica, MP, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry**  
**6 August 2004**

Ministers present here today, the Director-General of DWAF, the staff at large.

I think it is always necessary to remind our young generation and recount the events of 9 August in 1956, when twenty thousand women gathered on the steps of the Union Buildings in Pretoria to protest to Mr JG Strijdom, the then Prime Minister, about the impending pass laws that would severely restrict their freedom of movement.

It was on that day that our great grand-mothers, our grand-mothers and our mothers – a few names immediately come to mind, Lillian Ngoyi, Helen Joseph and Dora Tamana - cried out: "Strijdom, *Whatint' abafazi, wathint' imbokodo. Uzakufa!*" – you have tampered with the women, you have unleashed a boulder. You will be crushed". These twenty thousand women, reacting to the extension of pass laws to African women, presented a petition demanding an end to the pass laws.

The irony to this story is that Strijdom died within a month of the march on the Union Buildings. At this point I would like to thank my staff for having organised an event for the Department to honour the Women's Day and to observe the Women's Month of August.

It is very encouraging to note the impact and the outcome of the events of that mid-winter's day in 1956 -

- We have a Constitution and Bill of Rights that purposefully protects the rights of women and all vulnerable groups in society.
- We have a women-biased legislative framework that should facilitate easy access to all social services by women,
- We are proud signatories to the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the SADC Addendum on the Prevention and Eradication of Violence against Women and Children and we actively participate in the Beijing Platform for Action.

Our government has been exemplary in advocating equitable representation of women in decision-making positions. In part, this has been done by having a significant increase in the number of women representation in all three spheres of government.

In the world's register of women in National Parliaments we are number 12 but as a Continent of Africa we are proud that Rwanda has the highest proportion in the world, with 49% women representation. As Africa we are responding well to a Constitutional referendum guaranteeing a minimum of 30% of parliamentary seats and other leadership positions to women.

It is worth mentioning that women with disabilities are also represented in our National Parliament, to the Gender Equity Commission and more importantly they are represented as a voice, a collective voice dedicated to realising the rights enshrined in the Bill of Right.

However, women with disabilities as a collective are still excluded from civil society in a variety of ways. They still remain among the poorest of the poor. They suffer backlog of little or no education, limited access to information and meagre resources significantly contributes to a cycle of poverty and disability.

Paradoxically, this population has made a significant contribution in the political growth of this country. A lot of our women's disabilities can be described as "injuries on duty" during the struggle to liberate this country and ensuring a brighter future for our children and the upcoming generation. Women with disabilities continue to contribute to the growth and development of the new South Africa.

This area remains a challenge for DWAF to effectively realise the objectives of the Employment Equity legislation.

The birth of our post-apartheid Constitution also gave rise to the development of a robust gender machinery to advance social justice by working towards making every fundamental human right in our Bill of Rights a real and tangible experience for every woman, child and man.

South African women have been significant players in placing South African socio-political and socio-economic goals within a holistic vision of which not only South Africans but also our neighbours and fellow Africans will be the beneficiaries. As women we have been part of setting the agenda for a new and imaginative sustainable development framework, the NEPAD.

But, as proud as we can be of our achievements, we still have a very long way to go.

This day (August 9<sup>th</sup>), still brings us together to remember and honour the 20 000 women who took action to protest against the pass laws; to acknowledge and celebrate the contribution of women in the struggle for liberation; but most importantly this day brings us together as the DWAF community to evaluate what and how much we have done in implementing the transformation agenda of government, central to which is gender mainstreaming in all programmes and activities of government and by implication of the Department.

Looking at the Public Service representation – women account for just below 28% in management and this is against a SADC target of 30%. Gender representation at top management level is still very minimal.

A local Women in Business census (released in June 2004) conducted by Empowerdex studied the status of women in corporate leadership found that only 7,1% of directors in South Africa are women and this compares to Australia which has 8,4%, the US with 13,6% and Canada's 11,2%.

This comprehensive census also measured the number of women on boards and in executive management of all the companies listed on the JSE as well as 17 of the largest state-owned enterprises in South Africa.

While women make up 52% of the adult population in South Africa, we are told - they make up only 41% of the working South African population, and they constitute only 14,7% of all executive managers. Of a total of 3 125 directorship positions, only 221 are held by women. Only 11 women hold chairs of boards out of a total of 364, and there are only seven female CEOs and managing directors in comparison to 357 males.

As DWAF we face even a greater challenge. Our area of work is technical in nature and we operate against a convention that the technical area is a man's world. We need to balance the reality that we still do not have women who possess the required skills and adequate experience in the area of water and the fact that water is undoubtedly a women's issue in a practical sense.

It is highly appreciated that we have a gender policy of the Department as part of the broader framework of gender policy of government. However, we need to establish a gender focal point, a separate and a stand-alone section for the realisation of our gender-friendly legislative framework in a sustainable way.

Our government is hailed, the world over, for our state-of-the-art Water legislation under the leadership and guidance of DWAF. Surpassing the targets of supplying clean and running water to our most needy communities features as the highlight of our many achievements during the first decade of democracy.

We need to take cognisance of the fact that gender mainstreaming as well as integrating the needs of rural development in our programmes, irrespective of the sector, has become very important for the second decade of our democracy. These are important components for the agenda of developing our country's second economy among other needs. As a country we cannot advance any further if we leave over half of our population underdeveloped and trapped in poverty.

Gender mainstreaming ensures that gender issues are integrated in all strategic documents and that women are fairly represented in all vision consultations and strategic forums. Vision consultations and strategic sessions should be specifically designed to ensure women's participation.

I think it is a known fact that women are the traditional managers of the water systems, yet their inclusion and participation in water resources management is far less than that of men. Women are often marginalized in the implementation of water projects at community level by community attitudes based on stereotypes.

The role of women as traditional managers of water systems have been taken away with the introduction of new technologies on the assumption that men (not women) should be trained in the maintenance of the facilities. Men are trained and employed fully as hand pump mechanics, while women are only trained as hand pump caretakers and are expected to work as volunteers.

As we design and establish our Water User Associations and Catchment Management Agencies as DWAF, we need to be conscious of this fact and reality. Strategies to address such challenges would include skills-training and education to allow women to participate in the establishment processes and to participate in decision-making. As DWAF we need to advocate the advancement of women in the water sector, and recognizing women's skills, experience and ability to define and solve their own problems.

The women's practical knowledge of the water subject would add value to the WUAs and CMAs. Our challenge is to balance both the social and technical components of the sector for sustainable development. For example, women are more likely to know the answers to questions such as:

- How is water lost through the system?
- How much are residents actually spending on the commodity?
- How much are they prepared to spend if assured of reasonably reliable supplies?
- In case of rationing, what are convenient rationing schedules?
- The list is long.

Giving women a significant role to play in the management of water resources and infrastructure will ensure that water projects respond to the actual needs of both men and women – the needs of the whole society.

We have very committed women among our midst. I am sure I will get to know people's contributions outside the Department but I think the role that Ms Nomxolisi Matyana is playing in the education and communication in water and sanitation sector should be highly commended. My sister, you are counted among the heroines of our society. You are the ambassador of our Department and of our country. On behalf of the Department I want to congratulate you on your nomination to the finalist Women of the Year Awards. You did not make it but have achieved a lot. Keep up the good work and let this attitude transcend especially to our young people.

To our young people and the youth, we need to repeat over and over the same message – isifo sikagawulayo asinalusizi, siyabulala kuba alukabikho unyango oluqinisekileyo. While we are busy looking for a cure for AIDS and HIV, you need to take precautions and use our policy of ABC – Abstain, Be Faithful and Condomise. I need to remind young women that they are a group that is highly vulnerable to the HIV and AIDS disease.

Before I conclude, I want to reflect a bit about the sessions I have been doing around the Department, as you are all aware. Firstly I would like to thank all of you for making my interaction with you a very fruitful exercise. I want to commend all of you for the maturity and professionalism in the manner in which you raised issues. I want to assure you that all the issues you raised will be attended to but I would like to plead for patience because it will take time to sort out the many issues that you have tabled as challenges. For different issues we will need different processes as issues range from policy gaps to issues of labour relations, to BEE and procurement issues that are of government priority. As a Department we need to sharpen our BEE and women empowerment strategies.

In conclusion I would like to remind all of us that Women's rights are human rights. The Freedom Charter is an old document, which the Congress of People adopted in 1955 – even before the resistance of women we are talking about today. This document carries the ideal of a non-racist and non-sexist South Africa.

In 2004 and after the first decade of our democracy, non-sexism is still priority on agenda of our government. We have an obligation and a Constitutional mandate to ensure that our women are protected and are treated as equal citizens of our society.

ENJOY THE REST OF THE WOMEN'S MONTH.

I thank you.