

Women in Water Awards 2005
Speech by Ms Buyelwa Sonjica, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry
Presidential Guests House
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Ladies and gentlemen

We are here tonight, as we come together each year, to celebrate and honour some remarkable South African women for the work that they have done in the water sector. This is an important year. It is the 50th year of the Freedom Charter, that remarkable document of the people of South Africa. It is also the year in which women have reconvened, 10 years after the Beijing Conference on Women, to examine the progress that we have made in the world in achieving equality between women and men, to examine how we have progressed with the commitments we made in Beijing.

In the international water sector, and in Africa in particular, we have had our own targets and challenges to meet with regard to women and water.

In the run up to the Second World Water Forum that was held in the Hague in 2000, the water sector in Africa developed the African Water Vision, 2025. In this document we committed ourselves, amongst others things, to 30% gender mainstreamed water policies by the end of 2005 and 100% gender mainstreamed water policies by the end of 2015. In South Africa we can be proud that we had a gender mainstreamed water policy by 1997! But we must also recognise that the challenges of implementation are greater than the challenge of developing the policy.

Two weeks ago, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa hosted a workshop on gender and water here in Pretoria. The purpose of the workshop was to take forward a commitment made by the African Minister's Council on Water at the end of last year to:

"To ensure that gender concerns are taken into account, through a recognised process of consultation with AMCOW, in policy formulation in all sectors of water, sanitation, human settlements, agriculture and food security, including harmonisation of policies and laws and domestication of international treaties, to create equity and equality by 2005."

This is a formidable challenge. The timeframes are short. And so the workshop brought together men and women from all over Africa to make recommendations for the implementation and achievement of the AMCOW gender commitments, to strengthen partnerships for an AMCOW action plan of mainstreaming gender issues in the International Decade and to create enhanced sensitisation on the importance of mainstreaming gender at all levels.

Let us pause a little in our celebrations, and consider why the issue of gender is so important in the water sector. Firstly, we need to recognise that gender disparities arise because of ideological, political, economic and socio-cultural systems that favour men and boys at the expense of women and girls. We need to recognise that these systems are all around us, even in South Africa, with its remarkably progressive and anti-discriminatory Constitution.

These gender disparities affect the achievement of human rights, the distribution of resources, wealth and other means of production, the sexual division of work and responsibilities, the ability to participate in decision-making and political power and the enjoyment of rights and entitlements. Even in South Africa, with our high proportion of women in Parliament and in Cabinet, these disparities persist.

Ensuring equal opportunities to women, girls, men and boys at all levels and all spheres requires us to acknowledge existing gender disparities and to take, when appropriate, positive discrimination measures to bridge the gender gaps. It also requires us to remove legal and non-legal barriers to women's empowerment and gender equality.

We should remember that women represent the great majority of the poor in Africa and if we wish to achieve poverty eradication we must empower women and ensure they have access to the necessary resources, including water. We should also remember that women farmers are as productive as their male counterparts, but that a higher proportion of female income is spent on family well being relative to male income. Empowering women and ensuring their access to water is good for the woman, good for the family, and good for the nation.

Poverty eradication and gender equality are closely entwined. In 1995, the Human Development Report stated that "human development, if not engendered, is endangered". Nowhere does this apply more than in the water sector.

So, we are here tonight to honour just a few of the many women in South Africa that are making a contribution in the water sector. They are a few of many, and of an increasing number. They are but a few of the many women throughout Africa that are making waves in the water sector, that are changing the lives of poor women and men for the better. I hope that we will build increasing opportunities for sharing our experiences with the rest of Africa in the empowerment of women, and learning from them. And there is much to learn.

As the workshop of which I spoke, there were two extraordinary Masaai women. They had come to South Africa, from their arid homes, to tell delegates to the workshop of their experience of building rainwater-harvesting tanks in their village. To talk about the process, the difficulties, the successes. And to talk, amongst other things, of how the attitude of their menfolk changed as the women brought water to the village. As one woman said - when the project started, her husband wanted to know why she was wasting her time attending meetings. But after the work on building rainwater tanks had progressed and he began to see the benefits, if she missed a meeting he wanted to know why she wasn't at the meeting! Women such as these two, in Kenya, in Malawi, in Limpopo and the Eastern Cape, walk with well-earned pride. I salute them.

There are also remarkable women at the other end of the scale, women in powerful managerial positions that deserve to be recognised. Some of them play crucial support roles without which the professionals could not function. I would like to make mention of one such woman. Mapula Modipa, Maggie, has been with my Department for the past three and a half years, leading the Corporate Services Branch. I am sure that many of you know her. So well has she done in DWAF that she has been offered a position as Head of Department for the Gauteng Department of Sports and Recreation. She has done a wonderful job in DWAF and given more than 100% of her time and commitment to her job. She will leave large shoes for her successor to fill. I would like to take this opportunity to wish her all the best in her new job. I can only imagine that she will be promoting swimming, canoeing and other water sports in Gauteng.

So, tonight we will be honouring the victories and contributions of women who have broken through societies stereotyping and have gone on to achieve success – not only as individuals but also for their communities and families. Tonight we are celebrating the hard work of women in the water sector, often in the face of tough battles to be recognised professionally, and to be allowed to contribute to the empowerment of all communities and to the improvement of daily living conditions.

Let us not forget that despite the strides we have made in South Africa, we have by no means achieved gender equality. Today, our Parliament has one of the highest proportions of women in the world - powerful, outspoken and committed women. We have ratified the Convention to Eliminate Discrimination against Women. We have women as the leaders of the houses of parliament, we have women Ministers leading powerful government departments, women who are leaders in business and industry, and women who have shaped their communities. And in the water sector we have many, many women who have made their mark.

However, gender representivity is still inadequate. Women make up about 52% of the adult population in South Africa. Yet, they only hold about 15% of all executive managerial posts. In my Department, we face a particular challenge because the water sector is viewed as a mainly technical field, traditionally dominated by men. We need to balance this reality through a progressive and active approach in transforming certain sections of the water sector, particularly in the engineering (civil, mechanical, chemical) and scientific fields, with special emphasis on opportunities for women from historically disadvantaged communities. We need to strengthen the participation of women in the management and policy fields, and we need to create meaningful opportunities for women, particularly the young ones, in the research arena.

I am proud to say that the South African government has taken the issue of gender and empowerment of women to heart. The high level representation we have here tonight, from government and other sectors, is testimony to the active participation of women in all spheres of life. The brief profiles of our finalists epitomise the varied contributions of women from all walks of life. They are powerful, outspoken, committed, compassionate women who have taken the daily struggles of our people to a level of practical solutions.

It was in order to recognise the role that women have played and continue to play in water management in South Africa that the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry, the Water Research Commission and the Water Institute of South Africa jointly developed the Women in Water Awards. The launch of the Women in Water Awards in 2002 marked the beginning of an important tradition in the water sector in South Africa. Later we will present awards to women who have played a leading role in five categories (either individual or group):

- MANAGEMENT & POLICY
- RESEARCH (OVER 35 YEARS OLD)
- RESEARCH (UNDER 35 YEARS OLD)
- COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
- EDUCATION AND AWARENESS

The awards are presented to women of stature, women who have excelled in their field, and who have made a significant contribution to the management of water in South Africa. In particular, the women who have been chosen have used their knowledge, their skills, and their considerable capacity to ensure that water management in South Africa contributes to a better life for all.

My congratulations to all the women who were nominated for the Awards, and for those who have not yet been nominated but who are out there, doing remarkable things, shaping the face of our country. My particular congratulations to all our finalists. You are shining stars, and through your commitment and dedication, our water sector is stronger than before.

Let us commit ourselves to ensuring that your work continues to inspire all, men and women, but that you will especially ensure that our young women carry on what you have started.

My wonderful guests, let me thank each and everyone of you for supporting this initiative. This process has certainly been given stature by the participation of the esteemed members of the adjudication panel. A special word of thanks to Eskom for their contribution and commitment to making this a glowing occasion, as well as to all who have made tonight possible.

I hope that not only will you enjoy this event, but that you will leave here inspired to take forward gender mainstreaming in the water sector, to empower women to take their rightful place in society, to build a better life for all.

Thank you