

National Women's Day Celebration
Speech by Ms BP Sonjica, MP, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry
Buffalo City Hall, East London
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Programme Director
Honourable Deputy Ministers Botha and Mabudafhasi
MEC Nel
Honourable guests, ladies and gentlemen.

I made an observation when in Tanzania. I was trying to highlight the role of women in the society. The first teacher was your mother. You owe the moral education that you have on your mother. All women are heroes and leaders. It is proper for us to embark on programmes of this kind. The biggest challenge is to take information that will liberate the women in the rural areas.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the Freedom Charter and it also marks the 49th anniversary of the historic women's march to the Union Buildings in defiance of the unjust apartheid laws.

In February 1994, the Women's National Coalition, an umbrella body of over 90 women's organisations established a Convention which adopted the "Women's Charter for Effective Equality".

The preamble to the Charter stated that South Africa's women were "committed to seizing this historic moment to achieve effective equality in South Africa. The development of the potential of all our people, women and men, will enrich and benefit the whole society". So this is not only about women. It is about women because in the world we still live in a patriarchal society.

Women presented the Charter to the parties then engaged in the multi party negotiations at Kempton Park. This assured each and every woman in this country that our Constitution would indeed entrench the rights of women for equality, and thus restoring women dignity and pride.

At the opening of the first democratically elected Parliament, the then President, Mr Nelson Mandela set the agenda for addressing the rights of women in a post apartheid South Africa, and I wish to quote him:

"Freedom cannot be achieved unless women have been emancipated from all forms of oppression. All of us must take this on board that the objectives of the Reconstruction and Development Programme will not have been realised unless we see, in practical and visible terms, that the conditions of women in our country has been changed for the better and that they have been empowered to intervene in all aspects of life as equals with any other member of society."

The 1956 Congress of the People epitomised the essence of the logical conclusion of that struggle by proclaiming, through the Freedom Charter, that all will be equal before the law; that in South Africa we envisaged that there would be no regard to sex, colour or creed in determining our place in society. This sentiment was carried through into the constitution as part of its preamble.

The battle cry, "all shall be equal" became the premise on which our struggle was based, and it has had great significance and meaning to the struggle for women's emancipation as well. Ordinary South African women from all walks of life, some whose names the struggle has engraved in granite, stood side by side with menfolk for decades to advance the cause of women.

I would like to recall the names of our stalwarts that have since passed the baton to us to see the struggle through. We all remember the humility and the compassion for people of leaders, such as Lillian Ngoyi, Albertina Sisulu, Gertrude Shope, Ruth Mompati, Helen Joseph, Amina Cachalia, Ellen Khuzwayo and Winnie Mandela made in this area.

The trail of bravery and sheer determination blazed by Nomatshaka Mgabela, Nozolile Gama, Rosebella Joyi and many other unsung heroines of our struggle from these shores cannot be forgotten. To this day, their role continues to demonstrate that South Africa cannot wish away the

resilience of its mothers, the wisdom of its women and the love that all these patriots had for their country.

The task of ensuring water is available in the household is that of a women.

In the pre-1994 era, access to water was not regarded as a fundamental right, and water policies were mainly geared to meet the needs of the then ruling white minority. A decade ago the ANC-led Government estimated that there were approximately 14 million people who did not have access to safe drinking water and 21 million people without adequate sanitation services.

These people, mainly in the rural areas were forced to fetch water from springs and rivers. The women in these areas were condemned to spend several hours a day walking to fetch water. This lack of access to both water and sanitation has made it increasingly difficult for our people to escape poverty. In this light, South Africa's water services policy has over the past ten years focused on ensuring access of the poor to adequate basic water supply and sanitation services.

Our country has made great strides in reducing the inequalities in this sector. In the period 1994 to 2004, 10 million people have received these basic water supply services. Already more than 27 million of our people are benefiting from our Free Basic Water Policy.

Despite the gains we have made, we recognize that a lot still needs to be done in addressing backlogs, especially of sanitation. It is my honest conviction that if we are to build a society where women have the confidence and ability to contribute to life in this country, we need to take seriously the issue of education of the girl child. Again, the Freedom Charter declared that "the doors of learning and culture shall be opened".

Water resource has an economic value and must play its role in our agenda for growth and development. The opportunities exist to ensure that the ideals of people centeredness are realized through empowering our people who were previously marginalized, especially women. The Department of Water Affairs and Forestry through its water allocation reform programme and other initiatives should ensure the realization of these ideals. Indeed we would like to see more emerging female farmers.

The majority of women still lives in the second economy and is adversely affected by poverty, unemployment, lack of financial and capital resources and lack of technical and professional skills. Through initiatives, such as the Masibambane Programme and Working for Water, women now have access to training and development. When the projects are finalized in the community, they still have the skills that they have acquired to assist them in advancing.

It is noteworthy to observe that government has been passed far more gender sensitive and specific pieces of legislation that promote gender equality and empowerment. Also, having almost 46% of our Cabinet Ministers and Deputy Ministers as women, has forced Government departments to start taking the needs of women into account. New programmes and projects have been developed that focus specifically on women.

It is important to recognize that even seemingly unrelated pieces of legislation, such as the Child Care Act, the Social Assistance Bill, the Firearms Control Bill, the Domestic Violence and Maintenance Act, amongst other legislation, have a positive impact on the economic empowerment of women. This is because such pieces of legislation offer protection and support to women and give them more confidence to enter the workplace and find new opportunities. Needles to mention legislation, such as the Employment Equity Act, and the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment Act provide a solid platform for participation and empowerment of women in the mainstream of our economy on an equal footing.

On the forestry front, through the National Forest Act, the links between community, conservation and commercial forestry are recognized and embraced. All the people of our country have equal opportunity to access our national forests.

We will ensure that our forests are utilized by communities, in conjunction with the State, for their economic advancement. Earlier this year during my budget vote I announced a Steering Committee

to drive a process of developing a Forestry Charter. This committee is guided at the helm by Ms G Moloi, the Chief Executive Officer of Umgeni Water. This initiative will contribute immensely in ensuring women participation in the mainstream of our economy, in a sector that has predominantly been male dominated.

There is a clear need to create awareness amongst all staff, including the highest levels as well as technical staff that gender mainstreaming remains our challenge and responsibility. My Department also needs to nurture and further develop its gender expertise, and perhaps the exchange on the many rich gender initiatives.

So we need, as policy-makers and elected representatives, to remain vigilant in ensuring that the environment for women in business continues to remain favourable and that any policies that government at all levels pass are gender-sensitive and empowering to women.

Secondly, we need information about our support structures and programmes to be given to women so that they can access them when they need assistance.

Thirdly, Government departments and agencies and the private sector must be pushed to find new ways to promote and support women enterprises.

Fourthly, we need to ensure that women move up the value chain; currently the majority of them occupy the lower echelons in business, in other spheres as well.

In conclusion, I need to indicate that I have instructed my Department to appoint a Gender-Focal person and I am informed that developments are at an advance stage to create such a unit.

I also wish to inform you that today marks the launch of the Sexual Harassment Awareness Campaign. The launch of this campaign signifies Government's commitment and leadership in combating this scourge in the workplace. Through our collective effort let us ensure that indeed "Women building a South Africa that truly belongs to all", is translated into action.

I thank you.