

Women in Water, Sanitation and Forestry Awards 2006
Keynote address by Mrs Lindiwe Hendricks, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry
Gallagher Estate
10 August 2006

Ambassadors
Chairperson of the Portfolio Committee
CEO of Eskom
CEO of Lepelle Water Board
Finalists
Members of the Adjudication Panel
Programme Director
Honourable guests
Ladies and Gentlemen

1. Introduction

It is an honour to be here this evening to celebrate and recognise South African women for the work that they have done in the water, sanitation and forestry sectors. Our awards this year coincides with the 50th anniversary of the historic women's march to the Union Buildings. In that 1956 march we saw the power of women working as a collective to try and bring about change. South Africa has had many great women who have dedicated their lives and energy to making a difference in this country; women leaders such as Lilian Ngoyi, Amina Kathrada, Helen Joseph, Frances Baard, Ruth First, and Ellen Kuzwayo; to name but a few of our women leaders who have inspired many to follow in their footsteps.

The call this women's month has been to recognise that while we have attained democracy there is still a great deal that needs to be done in South Africa until women are truly equal. The Deputy President in her address at the launch of the Progressive Women's Movement over the weekend said in her keynote address that: "The full emancipation of women is a pre-condition for a successful democracy in South Africa and the World." And the President in his address to the gathering of over 15 000 women at the women's march held two days ago recognised our democracy has not successfully been able to remove all of the obstacles that stand in the way of women to become truly emancipated.

We understand these obstacles and disparities arise because of ideological, political, economic and cultural systems that unfortunately still favour men and boys at the expense of women and girls. We see this gender bias around us every day despite our country having remarkably progressive and anti-discriminatory Constitution.

These gender disparities affect the achievement of human rights, the distribution of resources and economic opportunities, the division of work, and the ability to participate in decision-making. It is therefore necessary for us as women to ensure we lead the drive to remove the legal and non-legal barriers to women's empowerment and gender equality. We are therefore required to be activists for women empowerment in every area of our lives.

2. Women in government

Ladies and Gentlemen, I am proud to say that since 1994 the South African government has taken the issue of gender and empowerment of women to heart, not only at the policy level but also in areas of legislation, election of political representatives, and appointment of officials in government. For example, in my Department, the top management consists mainly of women where 75% of the Deputy-Director General posts are occupied by women – strong, committed, and dedicated women who are focused on achieving the goals that have been set by government.

Furthermore, our Parliament has the 12th largest proportion of women representatives in the world. We have ratified important international agreements to support women such as the Convention to Eliminate Discrimination against Women. We have women as the speakers of both houses of parliament, and we have over 40% women Ministers and Deputy Ministers, who lead powerful government departments.

3. Women in water

Programme director, greater representation of women in politics and as government officials definitely has an impact on the programmes run by government and its social policies. The contribution made by the government over the past twelve years to uplifting poor people and women has been significant.

An area that is critical to the upliftment and empowerment of women is the provision of clean water and sanitation. Many poor households which do not have access to such services are headed by women, particularly in the rural areas. To enable our people to live in dignity and well-being we must become activists in this sector. We must reaffirm our commitment not only to the delivery of water, sanitation and forestry services, but to ensuring that we mainstream gender to ensure that women can also benefit from the development opportunities that arise when we provide such services.

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, which committed us amongst other things to mainstreaming our water policies by 2015. South Africa can be proud that we had already achieved this target in 1997.

As women represent the great majority of the poor in Africa, achieving poverty eradication and women empowerment requires that women have access to the necessary resources, with water being a critical resource for rural households and small scale farmers. Female farmers are as productive as their male counterparts, but a higher proportion of female income is spent on family wellbeing, relative to male income. Empowering women and ensuring their access to resources is therefore good for the family, and good for the nation. The United Nations have shown that poverty eradication and gender equality are closely entwined; and in their 1995 Human Development Report stated that "human development, if not engendered, is endangered".

Ladies and Gentlemen, in South Africa through the National Water Act we require that suitable institutions be formed which must incorporate the appropriate community, racial and gender representation. To achieve this institutional reform my Department is overseeing the establishment of Catchment Management Agencies, and Water User Associations; as well as job creation projects in water and sanitation services. Already, the Inkomati, the Breede, the Mvoti to uMzimkulu, and the Crocodile West and Marico Catchment Management Agencies have been officially established and launched, and the Inkomati Governing Board has excellent gender representation, and is chaired by a strong, dedicated and powerful woman. I have great trust in how she will lead this nascent organisation to serve the needs of our people. The Nzhelele, the Mutale, the Mutshimbwe and the Nkonzo Irrigation Boards have been successfully transformed into Water User Associations.

However it is not enough that we transform these institutions alone, we must ensure that there is alignment of this institutional reform with the Water Allocation Reform (WAR) programme so that women have both access to water and representation on the relevant water structures and institutions.

For those who are not aware, the Water Allocation Reform programme aims to redistribute raw water in South Africa, so that we overcome historical legacy of apartheid water allocations, so that black women and men can have equitable access to water for productive purposes. In this programme we are engaging with women across the country to address issues such as land tenure, water rights and access to resources.

4. Sanitation

Ladies and Gentlemen, access to basic sanitation, especially among our rural poor, remains a major challenge. Currently, it is estimated that 15,3 million people do not have access to basic sanitation services. We cannot ignore the appalling negative impact that lack of access to these basic services has on human life, particularly on the vulnerable, such as children, the elderly, the sick, the disabled, and those living with HIV and Aids. This is truly a matter of life and death. And it is women who must find ways to access water and sanitation facilities, to care for those who are unable to do so themselves.

To address these challenges our government has set national targets that aim to replace the bucket system in established areas by December 2007; and eradicating the sanitation backlog by 2010.

The sector is however faced with huge delivery challenges which include how to stretch limited financial and human resources. An urgent need to speed up delivery is high on the political agenda so that we are geared up to ensuring accelerated sanitation delivery.

5. Women in forestry

Programme Director, we are also gearing up for forestry to make a major contribution to growth and development through the facilitation of small growers into the mainstream forestry sector, as well as the facilitation of new afforestation especially in the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal. The growing of trees in these areas will add to the economy, as well as provide employment and entrepreneurial opportunities to the local people, especially women. These processes are ongoing, emphasising the fact that without women playing meaningful roles in resource allocation and access, the system of skewed distribution will remain unchallenged, leaving us with an untransformed sector.

To support transformation of forestry my Department has been engaging with industry players in the development of the Forestry Sector Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment Charter. We have ensured that women's voices are heard and we gathered many inputs from women by amongst other things holding workshops with rural women to discuss forestry issues with them. One of the outcomes of these workshops was that they do not want some kind of special treatment, they simply want economic and development opportunities to be made available to them.

Some of their other requests focused on the need for women to be organised in the sector including establishment of co-operatives for small-scale operators; the need for physical safety and hygiene facilities to be urgently addressed; the need for ensuring appropriate working and living conditions; the need for training and capacity building; and – not least of all – the need for land.

6. The Awards

Honourable guests, transformation of our society is not the responsibility of government alone, we need the intervention and support of all of you, as partners – so that we can realise those demands of the women who marched so many years before. The awards we are holding tonight are to honour but a few of the many women in South Africa who are making a difference through their activism – role models for the rest of us to look up to.

It was in order to recognise the role that women have played and continue to play 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, some five years ago. And as you are aware, we have now expanded the focus to the sanitation and forestry sectors.

Tonight we are celebrating the hard work of women, often in the face of tough battles to be recognised professionally in very male dominated sectors. It is pleasing to note that, even though not sufficient, the roles that women are playing in the sanitation and forestry are slowly shifting from the traditional "soft" positions such as administrative support to assuming the very critical roles as service providers, decision-makers, managers of infrastructure delivery programmes and becoming involved in construction.

I am excited that I will shortly announce the winners and present the Awards to those women who have played a leading role in the following categories:

- MANAGEMENT & POLICY
- RESEARCH
- EDUCATION AND AWARENESS; AND
- COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT.

I congratulate all the women who were nominated for the Awards, and let me encourage those who have not yet been nominated but who are out there, doing remarkable things, shaping the face of our country. I am proud of all our finalists for having made it to this stage of the awards process. Through your commitment and dedication, our water, sanitation and forestry sectors are stronger than ever before.

In recognising the achievements of these women tonight, we will be honouring the victories and contributions of all women who have broken through society's stereotyping and have gone on to achieve success – not only as individuals but also for their communities and families.

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 contributions of women. They are powerful, outspoken, committed, compassionate women who have taken the daily struggles of our people to a level of practical solutions.

7. Conclusion

To conclude, ladies and Gentlemen, programme director, the water and forestry industry is still very much male-dominated, and we need to show that there is place for women at all levels of these industries. We also recognise the skills gap and the necessity of women from historically disadvantaged communities going into in the engineering, research and scientific fields - in line with the Joint Initiative on Priority Skills Acquisition (JIPSA) programme of government.

In raising awareness about the Awards, we held workshops across the country, and we have noted the call for a Women's Conference as well as an organisation for women in these sectors to take up the many challenges that we know exist. I support this call and will see how we as the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry can support the establishment of such an organisation and the holding of a conference.

I hope that you will all leave here inspired to take forward women empowerment more strongly so women take their rightful place in society, and contribute to building a better life for all and creating an age of hope.

Finally, I must thank the organisers for the work they have put into making this evening a success; and a special thank you must also go to the members of the adjudication panel for giving of their valuable time and knowledge to assist us in this process. Thanks to our main sponsor, Eskom, for their continued contribution and commitment towards making this a glowing occasion, and to Lepelle Water Board and the Centre for Public Service Innovation for their support.

I hope all of you enjoy this evening of celebration with us.

I thank you.