

Women in Water, Sanitation and Forestry Awards 2007
Speech by Mrs LB Hendricks, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry
Gallagher Estate, Midrand, Gauteng
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Deputy Ministers
Chairperson of the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Water Affairs and Forestry
Ambassadors
CEO of Eskom
Finalists
Programme Director
Honourable guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen

1. Introduction

I welcome everyone to this special occasion tonight where we celebrate and honour remarkable women for their excellent work in the Water, Sanitation and Forestry Sectors.

During this women's month of August there are a number of events for women held across the country and in many different sectors. These events are aimed at supporting and encouraging greater involvement of women in the respective sectors. Through these events we recognise and award excellence and thereby inspire women to achieve new heights and become role models for others.

What is important for all of these sectors is that space is created for women in what were typically male dominated areas. Since 1994 women have increasingly been occupying that space and are making their voices heard. The challenges that we as women face today to be accepted as equals by our male colleagues remain huge. It therefore becomes necessary for us to support and create opportunities for other women in the sectors in which we work.

Economists talk about a 'zero sum game', which implies that in order for one person to get ahead they must force someone out. However, other approaches argue that if you allow in new entrants; rather than forcing out the old players – new opportunities are created, which results in expansion and more people benefiting.

When we talk about Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment we emphasise that the overall benefits to the economy will result from increasing the number of black people that will be able to participate in the mainstream economy. The sustained economic growth we have experienced since 1994 has proven this approach to be correct.

The same logic applies to women empowerment.

Ensuring equal opportunities for women and girls at all levels and all spheres requires that we acknowledge existing gender disparities and take appropriate, positive differentiation to bridge the gender gaps.

South Africa is moving slowly from a patriarchal society to one in which women are encouraged to take their rightful place as equals alongside men. The National Water Act, 1998 requires Government to address the issues of gender inequity in water as much as it must address inequity arising from race or disability. It has been shown by international and local experience that human development and poverty eradication initiatives are greatly enhanced by the involvement of women in water resources management.

2. Private Sector Opportunities

Programme Director, with the growth in our economy a great deal of space has been created for new entrants – women and men, black and white; these private sector opportunities are also relevant for the water, sanitation and forestry sectors.

Through our Forestry Sector Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment Charter there is specific recognition of women participation in all the elements of the score-card, the implication of which is that women should form part of the empowerment deals, benefit from skills development, management opportunities and employment equity, as well as procurement and enterprise development.

In water and sanitation DWAF has also committed itself to ensuring that our procurement expenditure is in line with government targets for BEE; and we have been very successful in that regard, however we are falling short in the area of procurement from women empowered enterprises – an issue that we are dealing with as a matter of priority. We are now looking at how we can involve women in construction, particularly for the sanitation sector where we have a massive task of providing sanitation to over 3.7 million households.

There are also huge opportunities for women in our large scale infrastructure projects where we have set targets for the primary contractors to ensure that women empowered enterprises access at least 30% of the contracts.

Another area of opportunity for women enterprises is in the massive roll out of water services, where in partnership with municipalities and other players, we are working towards eliminating the backlog of people who do not have access to clean water.

3. Capacity to deliver

Ladies and Gentlemen, concurrent to us increasing the scope and opportunities for women in water, sanitation and forestry, we must also increase the capacity of women so that they are in a position to take advantage of these opportunities.

In forestry my department has undertaken a number of initiatives to build the capacity of women in the sector; these initiatives include training women on Forestry legislation, compliance, and Participatory Forestry Management. We have also been providing support for beekeeping, nursery development and management, as well as training in greening, pole processing, and charcoal making. Through our Arbour Week and tree planting campaign opportunities will be created for development of community nurseries which I am very excited about. Eight female students have also been allocated bursaries by my Department this year while pursuing their Forestry academic qualifications.

Likewise in the sanitation and water sector we are building capacity of women by providing training in construction and project management. We have also established a learning academy that is empowering young graduates with relevant skills in the water sector.

4. Water for Growth and Development

Ladies and Gentlemen, through the provision of basic services and new infrastructure we are not only providing a basic necessity and social upliftment but we are also contributing towards the economic growth of the country. In providing these basic services I believe we are investing in our people's future and creating the prospect of a better life. In addition, through our infrastructure projects we are unlocking industries such as mining that require water in order to operate. Such investments are very much linked to broader efforts to increase the levels of economic growth in our country as part of the Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative South Africa (AsgiSA).

There is a need to appreciate that the imbalances of the past are still prevalent in the Water Sector. The distribution and access to water resources for black farmers remains skewed and uneven and is being addressed under our Water Allocation Reform programme – with access to water contributing to unlocking opportunities for emerging farmers.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, ladies and gentlemen, at last years awards I announced our intension to create an organisation to support the establishment of an organisation for women in water, sanitation and forestry. Work on establishing this organisation is ongoing and forms part of the women empowerment strategy that my Department is in the process of developing for the Sector. Such an organisation would play a role in identifying opportunities for women and supporting their entry into this Sector.

I have made a personal commitment to ensure that women are firmly in the driving seat in Forestry, Water and Sanitation not only as recipients of basic services, but as empowered owners of their own enterprises in providing goods and services to these sectors. My Department has long committed itself not only to the delivery of water, sanitation and forestry services, but to ensuring that we mainstream gender in these processes, to ensure that women can benefit optimally from the development opportunities.

Finally, I would like to thank the adjudicators for your involvement and for giving of your valuable time and knowledge to assist in this process. I would also like to thank our sponsors for their generous support and for their contribution to empowerment of women. I hope that all of us are inspired by our winners and are prepared to create the space for women in your respective spheres and take forward gender mainstreaming more actively.

Please enjoy this evening of celebration with us.

I thank you.