

**Department of Water Affairs and Forestry National Women's Day Celebration**  
**Speech by Mrs LB Hendricks, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry**  
**Warrenton, Northern Cape**  
**10 August 2007**

Programme Director  
Premier Peters  
MECs  
Mayors of Warrenton and Magareng Municipalities  
Members of Parliament  
Members of Provincial Legislature  
Councillors  
Honoured guests  
Ladies and gentlemen

## **1. Introduction**

I am very pleased to be here in Warrenton and excited to be launching my department's Women's Month Programme. Congratulations to the Northern Cape for hosting us this year.

The month of August in each year is a very important month in our calendar because it gives us an opportunity to reflect on our achievements towards the struggle for women empowerment and a just society and also gives us an opportunity to create awareness about the importance of that historic day in our struggle for freedom, the women's march of 9 August 1956. It is time for reflection, a time for celebration, a time to assess the challenges that we are still faced with, and a time to recommit ourselves to continue fighting for women's empowerment.

Yesterday marked the 51<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the historic women's march to the Union Buildings in defiance of the unjust *apartheid* laws. On the 9<sup>th</sup> August 1956 when twenty thousand women gathered on the steps of the Union Buildings in Pretoria to protest to Prime Minister Strijdom against the impending pass laws that would severely restrict their freedom of movement, they started a long and proud tradition of equality for women in South Africa. It was on that day that our grandmothers and our mothers (great people and leaders such as, Lillian Ngoyi, Helen Joseph and Dora Tamana) cried out: "Strijdom, *Wathint' abafazi, wathint' imbokodo. Uzakufa!*" – You strike a woman, you strike a rock. You will be crushed".

What stands out about this march was that 1956 was the height of oppression, so a gathering like theirs could result in arrest, torture and death - but lamagokla were not scared; they had had enough and were ready to face death to attain their freedom. What is also intriguing is the planning that went into making this march possible was done without the use of phones or faxes. The sheer determination is something all of us can learn from them.

## **2. Women in the Democratic South Africa**

In 1994 when we buried apartheid by voting in a new democratic government, we were left with a legacy of inequality and patriarchy. And the battle cry of 1956 was not forgotten: "You strike a woman, you strike a rock. You will be crushed".

At the opening of the first democratically elected Parliament in 1994 President Mandela, set the agenda for addressing the rights of women in a post-*apartheid* South Africa. He said: "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 have 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."

Yesterday at the Galeshewe Stadium in Kimberly during the Women's Day celebrations President Mbeki continued with a similar message when he said "The struggle for gender equality is a struggle for human freedom", and that "The liberation of our country will remain incomplete until the total and unconditional liberation of women is achieved."

Our President then asked "whether the women of our country, thirteen years into the democratic order, and 51 years after marching on the citadels of Apartheid for justice and equality, live in conditions of

'Emancipation, Empowerment, Equality and Eradication of Poverty'." This is the question that all of us who occupy positions of leadership or positions of influence must ask ourselves.

It is fair to say that since 1994 much progress has been achieved for women in our country. Our Constitution, legislation and policies make provision for the protection and promotion of the rights of women and all vulnerable groups in society. Through our tireless efforts women have been given equal opportunity in the workplace and are indeed climbing the ladder in both the public and private sectors. And as the President said "Today women have access to social grants, to housing, education, health care and free basic services among others. Further, as government, we will continue to work with our social partners to promote the economic empowerment of women to have easy access to resources such as finance and ensure that we fast-track skills development at all levels."

Indeed women's empowerment forms the cornerstone of many of government's policies. The government recognizes that by empowering women, the whole nation will be empowered. Failure to do so would be disastrous: "You strike a woman, you strike a rock. You will be crushed".

### **3. Women Meeting the Challenges**

Ladies and Gentlemen, through the changes brought about by democratic government women now have greater opportunities than ever before. And many many women have risen to the challenge. We have seen women enter the business world, start businesses, and become directors of companies. Women are now a force to be reckoned with in politics - and we have seen the example set by our own Deputy President Pumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, and the many Ministers, Premiers, Mayors, MPs, and Councillors.

What is critical is that we as women have been strong enough to overcome our apartheid past, overcome the patriarchy and sexism that still exists in our society, and move beyond that to take our rightful place in society.

Sadly there are still women who are not able to overcome these barriers and there is still much work that needs to be done before we can say we are truly free. As women leaders we have a responsibility to ensure that we create the right environment and space for other women to succeed.

### **4. Violence against women**

Programme Director, one of the greatest barriers that we still face is violence against women. Every day we see and hear tragic stories of murder, rape, assault, and abuse of women and children. It must stop. If we are going to have equality in our society then it must stop. "You strike a woman, you strike a rock. You will be crushed".

In his address yesterday President Mbeki spoke about how many women are still subjected to various forms of abuse, and he called upon all sectors of society to join forces in a national partnership to fight against all forms of abuse against women, and to join the Campaign of 365 Days of Activism against Violence Against Women and Children.

### **5. Addressing Poverty through access to basic services**

Ladies and Gentlemen, a critical part of empowering women is to address the poverty that holds them back from attaining their true potential. Being able to live in a house; having access to water, sanitation, electricity; sending your children to school; and having access to some form of income through employment, social grants or other income generating activities – are all necessary measures in addressing and uplifting people out of poverty.

Our government is committed to creating a better life for our people and to the provision of basic services. For water and sanitation, my specific area of work, we are committed to providing access to clean water and access to basic sanitation for all of our people. Lack of access to water and basic sanitation brings risk of ill-health or even death and undermines people's dignity. Traditionally women and young girls have the responsibility for fetching water, so providing access to this basic service goes a long way in emancipating women.

### **6. Women in Water and Forestry Sectors**

Ladies and Gentlemen, my words here today are not empty words to please you. We are taking action - action to deliver water and sanitation, and action to empower women. Last year, in partnership with

provincial governments and municipalities, we were able to supply a further 1.25 million people with water, and 950 000 more people were given access to basic sanitation. We are continuing with our efforts to provide water and sanitation to all our people, and in addition by the end of this year we look forward to eradicating the bucket system in established formal settlements.

My message today about empowering and supporting women is one that I have taken very seriously and has resulted in concrete programmes. In December 2006 I outlined my priorities and the projects that I wanted implemented. One of the projects I announced was the Empowerment of Women. I have made a personal commitment to ensure that women are firmly in the driving seat in water, sanitation and forestry not only as recipients of basic services, but as empowered owners of their own enterprises in providing goods and services to the sector. I have also made a commitment to support the establishment of an organisation for women in water, sanitation and forestry, which would play a role in identifying opportunities for women and supporting their entry into this sector.

I am informed that consultations in this regard are at an advanced stage and I call on women of the Northern Cape to demand information and ensure that they are not left behind.

It is not only the provision of clean water for households that we are addressing but also the allocation of water to emerging farmers so that we deal with the imbalances created by apartheid allocation of water.

Programme Director, South Africa is a water scarce country, and the people of the Northern Cape feel this water scarcity more than most. It is therefore important that people get more involved in water issues either through structures such as Water User Associations (where they have been established) or they support our efforts to protect our water and use it more efficiently so that we are able to ensure 'some for all, forever, together'.

I would like to specifically mention the Working for Water programme, as one of the programmes that is aimed at protecting our water resources, because of the impact that it has had on job creation in Northern Cape with about 2 500 people being employed, half of which were women. I have also been informed that there are plans to further expand the opportunities in the value industries linked to this programme such as charcoal, furniture, crafts and firewood.

## **7. Careers in the Water and Forestry Sectors**

Ladies and Gentlemen, I spoke earlier about the importance of education and skills development in empowering women and in lifting people out of poverty. Deputy President Mlambo-Ngcuka is driving a skills programme to increase the levels of skills in our country and in the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry we are supporting these efforts by encouraging learners to become scientists and engineers, providing bursaries to deserving candidates, and providing training opportunities to young graduates through our Learning Academy.

I would like to encourage young women to find out more about these opportunities available through my Department's programmes so they can pursue a career in the Water and Forestry Sectors.

## **8. Conclusion**

To conclude, programme director, President Mbeki said in his address:

"Today, on this National Women's Day, we renew our pledge to realise our vision of a non-sexist and non-racial society in which women are equal and active partners in building the new South Africa."

It is a pledge we should all commit to and strive for.

Igama lamakhosikazi malibongwe!