

Launch of the Women in Water Awards

Ronnie Kasrils, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry

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Ladies and gentlemen, friends, distinguished colleagues, it is a pleasure to be here tonight to launch the South African Women in Water Awards.

Water is a precious substance – it feeds our nations, builds our communities, drives our industry, washes away ill health, quenches our thirst and brings beauty into our lives. Without water we are nothing. And yet we cannot take access to water for granted. In this modern world of ours a great deal of human effort and ingenuity goes into providing water for drinking, for growing food, for industry and agriculture. Few people truly understand the complexity of the task of managing our scarce water resources in South Africa; few people realise the dedication and skill of the women and men who ensure, on a daily basis, that there is enough water to meet the needs of our growing nation.

In my department alone, over a thousand people work each day to manage and protect the water resources of South Africa. Thousands more are dedicated to ensuring that all South Africans have access to clean, safe water and adequate sanitation. They learn from international practice and they share their knowledge with the international community. They are aided by provincial departments, by water boards and local authorities, by researchers, scientists and academics in a variety of institutions. They are aided by NGOs and CBOs. They are aided too by the men and women in communities who contribute their time and energy to managing water and sanitation at the local level.

All these people contribute, in their own way, to the management of our scarce water resources and to the provision of water and sanitation to the people of South Africa.

Amongst these people are a number of women who contribute in no small measure to the excellence of water management in South Africa. Yet all too often women are the unsung heroes of the water world. Often the picture that people have of women and water is of poor rural women carrying buckets of water on their heads, or standing in queues next to standpipes. While those images are, unfortunately still real, they are only part of the picture.

There is an old saying that “Women hold up half the sky”. Sometimes I think they hold up more than their half. And yet, often their contributions are ignored.

South Africa has a proud tradition of powerful women. Women like Ray Alexander and Frances Baard have been leaders in our trade union movement since the beginning of last century; our women writers like Nadine Gordimer, Bessie Head and Olive Schreiner are internationally recognised. Women were integrally involved in our struggle for liberation from command structures to ordinary foot soldiers, and many sacrificed their health and their lives for freedom. The names of Helen Joseph, Lilian Ngoyi, Ruth First, Amina Cachalia, Albertina Sisulu, Winnie Mandela and many others ring across our history.

Even ordinary women have done extraordinary things in South Africa. I think of women rebuilding their families and homes after forced removals dropped them in the barren veld; I think of the 20 000 women who marched to the Union Buildings in 1956 when Strydom’s government decided to extend their abominable pass laws African women. They came to Pretoria in their thousands – babies on their backs. They came from thousands of miles away. They came by train, by bus, on foot. They stood outside the Union Buildings and they sang: You

have struck a woman, you have struck a rock - a phrase that still describes the women of South Africa.

Post 1994, 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 Ministers, women leading powerful government departments, women who are leaders in business and industry, women who lead their communities. And in the water sector we have many, many women who have made their mark.

It is in order to recognise the role that women have played and continue to play in water and sanitation management in South Africa that my department, the Water Research Commission and the Water Institute of South Africa jointly developed the Women in Water Awards. I must thank Dr Rivka Kfir of the Water Research Commission and her team, the CEO of WISA, Mr Willie Lotz, and the staff of my department, who have made this event happen. Today is the result of their hard work, and marks the beginning of an important tradition in the water sector in South Africa.

Each year, from now on, we will present awards to women to have played a leading role in five categories:

- policy
- management
- research (over 35 years old)
- young scientist (under 35 years old)
- community (given to an individual or a community group)

The awards will be presented to women who have excelled in their field, and who have made a significant contribution to the management of water and sanitation in South Africa.

During the course of this year, we will call for nominations, from the public, from individuals, from institutions, of women that they wish to see rewarded for their contributions. Nominations for each category will be considered by a panel appointed by me, and next year, during National Water Week, the first winners will be presented with their awards.

Since this is the launch of these awards, we have not yet been through the process of calling for nominations. Tonight, therefore, I wish to exercise a personal prerogative which I humbly hope you will accept and that is to allow me the honor to recognize a few women whose work exemplifies the calibre of women in water and sanitation in South Africa. In particular, the women that I have chosen to recognise 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.

It is appropriate, in the year in which the World Summit on Sustainable Development is held in South Africa, that we give recognition to women who have contributed substantially to the role of water in sustainable development.

Sustainable development is premised on three interlocking and mutually dependent elements: social, environmental and economic. These values underpin our National Water Act as well. In the run-up to the World Summit on Sustainable Development, we have articulated clearly our belief that poverty is the greatest threat to sustainable development in the world. Poverty is also the greatest threat to the stability of South Africa or any country on earth. Poverty eradication is one of the highest priorities of the South African government. Lack of access to water is one of the defining criteria of poverty. Without mincing words: if you do not have access to water you are, by definition, poor. Thus our drive to provide access to water and to the benefits of water to all South Africans, is a major contribution to the eradication of poverty within our borders. The

provision of free basic water in particular, is a huge step forward in this regard – despite being considered close to heresy by some sectors of the international community!

Job creation and growing the economy is a key element of any sustainable development strategy in South Africa. And without a regular and reliable supply of water, our economy cannot grow.

To complete the picture, the protection of the environment is a key element of sustainable development. The National Water Act requires us to protect aquatic ecosystems, and our scientists and ecologists have put a great deal of energy and innovation into creating new methodologies for calculating the quantity and quality of water required to maintain sustainable aquatic ecosystems. You will note how I have linked sanitation to water management throughout my address. We have a saying “Amanzi Ayimpilo – Water is Life” – To this we must add: “Sanitation is dignity”. The cholera epidemic has taught us that it is not significant to provide clean water to our people. They must also be provided with adequate sanitation and the hygiene education that is necessary for a healthy nation.

We have done sterling work in halving the deficit of rural people without clean water. I have geared my Department to speed-up progress with regard to sanitation. Without adequate sanitation our people suffer and so does our precious aquatic ecosystem which we must protect. Obviously linked to this is a country’s capacity to purify water as well as treat waste water. In this heavily urbanised and industrialised country we face considerable challenges added to by our need to address the needs of rural communities and the agricultural sector. Sanitation has traditionally taken second place to water supply. It must become as important.

The women that I have chosen to recognise this evening have all contributed to sustainable development in South Africa. They are women who embody the values of our Constitution,

women who provide powerful role models to their colleagues and to the public, women who hold up more than half the sky. You will have to wait until after the main course to meet the women whom we are recognising tonight. But let me say that they are only a handful of a much greater body of women who contribute their energies to making our water and sanitation management so successful. I would, therefore, like to take this opportunity to thank **all** the women in South Africa who contribute to managing, protecting and delivering water. Each of you has contributed to making a better life for all.

As we recognise the women in water in this way, each year, I hope to see the recognition of the contribution made by women in all spheres of water management including the important field of sanitation grow. I also hope that the role models put forward by these women, each year, will provide the incentive for more women to enter the water sector, be it at the community level, as managers, scientists, engineers, social scientists or politicians. I hope that these awards will provide one incentive in a bigger programme of encouraging women to play their full and recognised role in water and sanitation management in South Africa.

They say a woman's work is never done – at least in the water sector, from now on it will be recognised. Malibongwe makhosikazi.

Thank you all for attending and making this a memorable occasion. I once again wish to thank all our National Water Week sponsors: Eskom and Sappi as well as Umgeni Water and Randwater.