

WOMEN'S DAY IN CHICAGO:

Forward Ever; Backward Never!

Speech by Mrs Noluthando Mayende-Sibiya, Minister for Women, Children and Persons with Disabilities, at the Women's Day Celebrations of the South African Consulate General in Chicago Illinois on Friday, 21 August 2009

Her Excellency, the Consul General, Ms Nomvume Magaqa,

Chairperson of the Illinois Judicial Council, Judge David Atkins,

President of the Women's Bar Association of Illinois, Patrice Ball-Reed,

President of the Black Women Lawyers Association of Greater Chicago, Ashanta Evens Blackwell,

President of the Cook County Bar Association, Marian Perkins,

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As our nation celebrate National Women's Day under the theme "together, empowering women for development and gender equality", one cannot help but be reminded of what our first president, Nelson Mandela said during his first address to the first democratically elected parliament in May 1994.

Tata Madiba then said then that "it is vitally important that all structures of government... should understand... that freedom cannot be achieved unless women have been emancipated from all forms of oppression... (and) unless we see, in visible and practical terms, that the condition of women of our country has radically changed for the better, and

that they have been empowered to intervene in all aspects of life as equals with any member of society”.

Fifteen later, we are still coming to grips with the realities that our first president identified then. Today, we are still confronted with inequalities that make it difficult for women to “intervene as equals”.

But on the 10th of May this year, our fourth president, Jacob Zuma, took the most courageous step and made the biggest intervention on behalf of women in our country when he established the Ministry for Women, Children and Persons with Disabilities to *“emphasise the need for equity and access to development opportunities for the vulnerable groups of our society”.*

During our National Women’s Day celebrations in Vryheid President Zuma developed this idea further and stated it unequivocal in his address that *“this ministry will mobilise for the participation of the three sectors in all aspects of life”* and that this ministry *“will monitor other government departments to ensure the mainstreaming of gender, children’s rights, and disability considerations into all programmes of government and other sectors”.*

The establishment of this department is in essence the realisation that the status quo can no longer be intact. The establishment of the Ministry for Women, Children and Persons with Disabilities is in actual fact the rude awakening that more needs to be done to transform our society and state so that we can better respond to the needs and demands of all citizens but particularly women.

That is why, in line with the above we will focus on strengthening and broadening the National Machinery for Women’s Empowerment and Gender Equity through the establishment of effective and efficient advisory units in all spheres of government because

we are convinced that the women's issues are human rights issues and cannot be isolated from all other issues.

Equally important, is the need for a Women's Advisory Council that will meet from time to time to measure our progress as a country with regard to women empowerment, gender equity and gender mainstreaming but also to advise the executive on these crucial matters.

This formal structure is not only a necessary in our resolve to improve the lives and position of women in society but it is also important that women have a credible platform through which they interact regularly and effectively with their government.

Your Excellency, while Madiba's words remain relevant today, the Zuma-administration take full responsibility and made the point that we can no longer be happy with a situation that dictates that women remain on the fringes of society and under-represented on forums where it matters.

It is estimated that women represent nearly 55% of the entire public service women in top management in government represent less than 35%, still far off from the ideal of having 50-50 gender parity between the sexes.

According to the Consultation Document, "A Strategic Framework for Gender Equality within the Public Service: 2006 - 2015", issued by the Department of Public Service and Administration, women made up 65% in the professional occupational category but "they tend to be concentrated at the lower levels of the occupational category".

Furthermore, "women account for 34% professional and middle management terminations".

Three weeks ago, results from the annual MasterCard Worldwide Index of Women's Advancement found that women's confidence in their earning potential and prospects for managerial positions continue to fall and, in so doing, the socio-economic inequality

between women and men is increasing. South Africa's Index score declined from 90.6 in 2008 to 85.7 this year.

According to this Index, a score below 100 indicates gender inequality in favour of males while a score above 100 indicates the converse and a score of 100 indicates equality between the sexes. This is measured according to above-median income, managerial positions held, labour force participation and the ratio of female to male enrolment for tertiary education.

This study found that, with the exception of the indicator that measures tertiary enrolments ratios, the indices showed increased inequality at the expense of women in South Africa.

Your Excellency, the message is loud and clear; we can no longer turn a blind eye and assume that everything is perfect while reality sings a different tune.

We can no longer be happy as a country or as women when we are confronted with these stark realities on a daily basis.

We can no longer rest assured as professionals and mothers when we climb all the available ladders but are still told to wait a little longer.

This government agrees with you; you have been waiting for much too long.

This government concurs that you have been patient for long enough and that this intolerable situation can no longer prevail.

This government stand with you when you say that something is not right and it has to change.

As proof of our commitment, we will soon start discussions on a legal framework that will enforce a minimum 50% participation of women in political and decision-making positions in both the public and private sectors.

This is part of advancing our 50/50-Campaign which calls for the equal representation and empowerment of women to enable them to play a positive and dynamic role in bringing about social justice in society.

Such a legal instrument is long overdue and we are certain that this is necessary, will help us in emancipating women and in changing their situation.

Women empowerment is not only about ensuring more women in top management. When we have that perception of this noble ideal, we are unfortunately wrong and misguided.

Women empowerment also means that women must have access to opportunities and use the available training and development platforms to improve their own standing in our society.

Or, as President Jacob Zuma puts it in his speech on Women's Day: *"It's about opening up the space for women to influence meaningful change and make a difference in society. It is about promoting the participation of more women in public platforms and the media"*.

From the available data one can easily see that women are well-represented in the public service but they are under-represented where it matters.

Women should indeed be at the forefront of social and economic transformation as we know that when mothers are at work for our country, communities reap the benefits.

We also know that when women are working for our people, its families that progress and develop.

There is an intrinsic relationship between the two and it cannot be separated.

But today I would like to pay tribute to those brave women who know no fame or fortune, have no remarkable distinction or accolades to boast about, have no meaningful possessions to claim, whose names will not bring any memory to the mind and whose sacrifices bring no discomfort to the soul or upset to the heart.

Our strength as a country, our success as a nation and our stability as a people can only be measured by the rate and pace, the impact and effect and the results and successes we experience when we change the lives of women in such a way that they can reach their full potential and claim equal and full citizenship in this country.

When we have done this, the single mother should be able to say, "I'm single but not alone".

When we have answered the prayers of the struggling grandmother, she should be able to declare, "I'm struggling but not down".

When we have done this and have heard the plea of the widow, she should be able to scream, "I'm without a partner but not without a friend".

When we have done this and we have listened to the cry of the girl-child, she should be able to sing, "I'm growing but still glowing".

Tata Madiba said at another occasion that "in Africa, women and girls have often been doubly disadvantaged. They have had the curse of low expectations and unequal opportunities".

Tata Madiba was right for so long. I dream of a time when we can either proof him wrong or make him change his tune.

Let us all work for a South Africa where women and girls are no longer disadvantaged and where the curse of low expectation and unequal opportunities are lifted for good!

We do not only owe Madiba that, we owe that to ourselves.

Malibongwe!

Igama Lamakhosikazi!