

Address of the President of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, at the Women's Parliament

Parliament of The Republic of South Africa, Cape Town, 19 August 2008

Madam Speaker of the National Assembly,
Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly and Deputy Chairperson of the NCOP,
President of the Pan African Parliament, Dr G Mongela;
Ministers and Deputy Ministers;
Premiers and Speakers of the Provincial legislatures;
Members of Parliament;
Distinguished participants,
Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am very honoured to address you today, on the occasion of the Fourth Women's Parliament since its establishment in 2005.

10 days ago, the people of our country celebrated the National Women's Day; a day on which we as a nation do mainly three things:

- Remember the exceptional contribution made by women of our country and continent to ensure that we achieve a just, democratic, non-racial and non-sexist society;
- Assess the progress, or lack thereof, of our society to advance the objective of the emancipation and empowerment of women; and
- Recommit ourselves to accelerate the struggle for gender equality.

Indeed, it is appropriate that during our Women's Month, all of us should salute the women of our country and continent, who are clearly a powerful and reliable engine for change.

Clearly, an important element of the crucial role you play and must continue to play is to ensure that women take their proper place in the historic process of the Renaissance of our continent.

Just as our liberation from apartheid and colonialism would be incomplete without the total liberation of women, our continent will also never achieve its renewal if the women of Africa still experience different forms of oppression.

In its Gender Equality Report, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) says that:

"Any form of gender discrimination is a denial of human rights, an obstacle to human development. Gender mainstreaming means being deliberate in giving visibility and support to women's contributions and addressing the differential impact of strategies, policies, programmes and projects on women compared with men. It requires a focus on actual results in terms of gender equality in the practice areas at all levels."

The Report continues that:

"There are two complementary approaches to achieving gender equality: mainstreaming gender and promoting women's empowerment. Both are critical. Gender mainstreaming is 'the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes,...] making women's concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes [...] so that women and men benefit equally...'

"Women's empowerment is central to human development. Human development, as a process of enlarging people's choices, cannot occur when the choices of half of humanity are restricted. Targeted actions aimed at empowering women and righting gender inequities in the social and economic sphere, as well as in terms of civil and political rights, must be taken alongside efforts to en-gender the development process."

The Report continues further, that:

"Gender mainstreaming means being deliberate in giving visibility and support to women's contributions rather than making the assumption that women will benefit equally from gender-neutral development interventions. Policies and programmes that ignore differential impact on gender groups are often gender-blind; (and) potentially harmful for human development. Gender mainstreaming requires a focus on results to improve the well-being of poor women."

South Africa and Africa are faced with enormous challenges of poverty and underdevelopment. All of us agree that the reasons for this are the legacy born of centuries of colonialism and imperialism which expressed itself in political oppression, economic exploitation, social and cultural subjugation, as well mistakes we ourselves have made during the years of our independence. All these have contributed to the underdevelopment of Africa.

A stark example of the latter is that as we grappled with the development challenges in the post-colonial years, most of us thought, wrongly, that the African Man, the Liberator, will on his own, on his terms and at his own pace, without the involvement of women, also liberate the rest of society from hunger and underdevelopment.

Accordingly, for many years, the critical matter of gender equality remained on the sidelines. Clearly, together with neo-colonialism, cold-war rivalries, civil wars and mismanagement of economies, the marginalisation of women contributed to the further underdevelopment of Africa.

The vision of the African Renaissance enjoins us to put the emancipation of women at the centre of every principle, strategy, policy and programme we adopt at national, regional and continental levels.

As we know, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) met over the weekend here in South Africa. One of the most important decisions we took was the adoption of the Protocol on Gender and Development.

This Protocol is important because it consolidates all the important SADC's policies and programmes dealing with gender equity. The Protocol will help our region further to advance the process of women's emancipation through policies, laws, programmes and projects which all Member States have to implement.

As we know, this Protocol follows on a number of important decisions of our regional body with regard to this matter of gender. These include the SADC Declaration on Gender and Development which was adopted in 1997, which asserted the fact that gender equality is a fundamental human right, the SADC Addendum on the Prevention and Eradication of Violence Against Women and Children, as well as the UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

The SADC decision is also based on the Constitutive Act of the African Union, as well as its decisions, including the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa.

At the same time, while these decisions on the emancipation and empowerment of women are important, it is in the actual implementation that we will make a difference in advancing gender equality.

In this regard, much work still needs to be done as demonstrated by the SADC Report on Gender and Development. Under the heading: Women in Politics and Decision Making, the Report says with regard to representation in Parliament, Mozambique has achieved the highest level with 36%, followed by South Africa with 32,65%, Namibia with 31% and Tanzania with 30,4%.

As far as Cabinet is concerned, the Report says that only South Africa and Lesotho have made progress towards meeting the 50% target, with South Africa achieving 42,5% and Lesotho 32%.

At the District/Provincial levels, only Lesotho has surpassed the 50% target of women representation with 52% followed by South Africa with 37%. As far as the local government is concerned, Namibia leads with 45%, South Africa is at 40% and Tanzania has achieved 35,5%.

I have no doubt that we will all agree that these statistics communicate the clear message that to achieve our national and regional targets on gender equality we need to work in a spirit of Business Unusual.

Chairperson,

Gender inequalities make women vulnerable to income poverty and denial of opportunities and the essentials that provide a better life. If these issues are not addressed, together they perpetuate poverty from one generation to the next.

Importantly, strategies to eradicate poverty must also address factors such as respect, dignity and freedom as well as participation in all levels of decision-making.

Globally, but especially in Africa, women have inadequate access to the resources they need to become economically productive and independent. Yet, as we know, women are very industrious and dynamic in the face of serious odds.

We see this in instances where women defy serious challenges even in difficult circumstances, such as in the informal economy, working as hawkers, in part-time jobs, in agriculture and in domestic service, determined to provide for their families.

Both in the rural and urban areas, women have increasingly become the backbone of the family unit as well as the community. Clearly, because poverty among these women threatens to negate whatever advance we, as South Africans, have made since the onset of democracy in 1994, we need to strengthen our interventions on women's empowerment in the spirit of the Women's Day clarion call: All Hands on Deck, All Power to the Women!

However, having mentioned these challenges, women must also be applauded for their resilience. Despite the many obstacles many of you who are gathered here, as well as others in our society and in different parts of our continent have made important gains, taking us a step closer to the achievement of gender equality.

In this regard, Madame Chairperson, I salute the 2008 Women's Parliament for its decision to focus on the subject of poverty eradication and to explore what institutions such as this Parliament should do further to ensure that society, and women, are liberated from poverty.

Madam Chairperson, as you know, government has just launched a national War on Poverty Campaign so as to accelerate and strengthen our struggle against poverty. Naturally, the main focus of this campaign, which will concentrate on the poorest of the poor in all nine provinces, will be women and children.

The most deprived households identified in the poorest wards will be visited continuously by a team of professionals and community workers to identify their specific needs and to accelerate access to government services, provide safety nets and assist the households to graduate away from dependence on social grants.

This means motivating each household also to make its own contribution to the struggle against poverty and its upliftment, so that the people in general and women in particular are empowered to be self-reliant - their own liberators.

We trust that this Parliament will, as may be necessary, suggest other initiatives further to accelerate the process of the eradication of poverty and underdevelopment.

Clearly, in doing this, the wealth of information and experience of what we have done and what we are doing will be important. Hopefully the Parliament will therefore also make a critical assessment of our past and present to help all of us decide what works better and what needs to be improved.

I trust that this Women's Parliament will also have the benefit of parallel processes in the global and continental arenas that also seek to find new solutions to the challenge of poverty.

The International Conference on Women and the Economic Recovery of Africa that our Parliament hosted two years ago would be one such important reference point.

I also believe that lessons learnt in institutions such as NEPAD and the Pan African Parliament should also be examined and taken into account, because I have no doubt that these will further enrich deliberations on the critically important issue of poverty eradication.

Chairperson,

The Women's Parliament has in previous years highlighted the crime of human trafficking. The South African government has submitted a Bill to Parliament so that we can better confront this heinous offence.

Similarly, we must continue to focus on the issue of violence against women and children on a sustained basis. Among other interventions on this matter, government has established 10 centres countrywide, dealing, specifically with violence against women with an additional seven expected to be established by the end of the year, and a total of 50 by 2010.

However, for all of us to uproot this malaise, we need family and community involvement. We need to teach our boys from a young age that violence against any other person is unacceptable. We need to break the silence on domestic abuse. We need to bring about a community culture that ostracises those who commit violence against any human being, especially women and children.

Chairperson,

Today, as South Africans, even when we tend to be harsh with ourselves, we do acknowledge that we have made important progress in addressing the legacy of apartheid, some of whose elements are the oppression of women, poverty and underdevelopment, which affects, overwhelmingly, the black majority.

As we know very well, we still have a long journey ahead of us to achieve the goal of a non-sexist, non-racial and prosperous society.

But, as society, and as public representatives we should never, ever lose hope that we will ultimately reach our goal. We should never be discouraged by the occasional setbacks, because if we do, we would demoralise the millions of people whose hopes rest on our shoulders.

We must draw inspiration from what we have achieved in the last fourteen years which, in many respects, is unprecedented. This includes the impact of our various interventions with regard to the improvement of the lives of the women of our country.

However, if I may borrow words from the world of athletics, we must constantly keep this in our minds that the process of social transformation in which we are involved is an extra-marathon rather than a short sprint. We must, therefore, have the stamina to stay the course.

Chairperson and Delegates, we remain humbled by your resolve and your dedication to the cause of the emancipation of women, as well as the work you do radically to change the life circumstances of all our people. I have no doubt that your efforts will help accelerate our advance towards the achievement of the goal of a better life for all.

We look forward to the results of your deliberations! and wish you a successful interface during the 2008 Women's Parliament.

Wathint' abafazi,

wathint' imbokodo!

Thank you.