

**SPEECH BY PREMIER SIBUSISO NDEBELE ON NATIONAL WOMENS DAY
AT KINGSMEAD ON AUGUST 9, 2006**

I am very pleased to be with you today to commemorate National Women's Day. Fifty years ago, on this day in 1956, our women struck a blow to apartheid. As victims of pass laws, they came from all over South Africa, converging on Pretoria's Union Buildings to take a stand for justice and humanity.

In 1956, they addressed their petition to Prime Minister J.G. Strijdom, a white Afrikaner male, who was too busy to receive them. Today our women will be received by South Africa's Deputy President Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka. What a powerful symbol of just far our journey has taken us!

And we must acknowledge that it is thousands of ordinary folk, like these heroic women, who have taken us this far. The women were not only fighting for their civil rights but also for their political rights. They were fighting for the right to have a voice, to participate in shaping the nation and influencing the national identity and rights and freedoms of our country. For all of us, National Women's Day is the opportunity to remember the South African women of the past, from all walks of life, who fought and who gave and risked their lives for a democratic South Africa.

Under the banner of the Federation of South African Women, they challenged the idea that "a women's place is in the kitchen", declaring it instead to be "everywhere". And that is fast becoming the case, in a universal sense. From Deputy President Mlambo-Ngcuka in the deputy president's seat to Mohammed Ali's boxer daughter, Laila Ali stinging like a bee in the boxing ring, women are taking up their rightful place in society.

Women as struggle icons

But, as a country, we still have much to achieve in terms of the rightful commemoration of our women struggle heroines. As pointed out by Arts & Culture Minister Pallo Jordan: "It is unfortunate that legendary women leaders like Charlotte Manye-Maxeke, Madie Hall-Xuma, Cissy Gool, Ray Alexander Simons, Winifred Siqwana, Ida Mntwana, Dora Tamana and Annie Silinga - unlike their male counterparts - are not household names."

The Department of Arts and Culture is working on a compilation of biographies of a number of South African women, and is also working with a number of the country's universities to host a series of lectures on the lives of some of the veterans of 1956.

As a Province, we fully support this national initiative to acknowledge the significant role of our women and to compile a record of their courage for future generations.

Government Programme of Action

We understand that the struggle for emancipation of women is intrinsically linked to our broader struggles for social transformation. Our government has taken bold steps to better the lives of women because we understand that we better the lives of women we better the lives of children and families too as families rely on mothers and wives for emotional support and care; families rely on women for labor in the home; and increasingly, families rely on women for income needed to raise healthy children and care for other relatives.

The elimination of discrimination and inequities in our province is of supreme importance because we realise that - as long as girls and women are valued less, fed less, fed last, overworked, underpaid, not schooled and subjected to violence in and out of their homes - their potential to contribute towards a peaceful, prosperous world will not be realised.

We are establishing human rights desks in all district municipalities where, amongst other matters, women empowerment and gender equality will be fast tracked.

One of our main focuses is the prevention of gender-based violence, and prevention is best achieved by empowering women, reducing gender disparities, and by changing norms and attitudes which foster violence.

Therefore, to be efficient interventions have to employ a multi-sectoral approach and work at different levels: individual, community, institutional, and laws and policies. They have to create and foster partnerships between government and non-governmental agencies. They have to mobilise international awareness and support.

Leading by example

The provincial government has established a Cabinet Committee on the Status of Women that will be responsible for the strategic policy direction of gender equality and women empowerment. We believe that the success of the reform of the province should be judged on how well it uses its human resources and especially on how it overcomes its failure to use the full potential of its women.

Gender equality goes hand in hand with democracy, at all levels. Women's rights are human rights. Freedom from discrimination, embodied in the South African Constitution, is the cornerstone of our democracy. But democracy requires more than an absence of discrimination. It needs governance. And good governance means sharing the power to make decisions – in politics, in economic and social life, in public administration and in the home.

As our province, we are leading by example. The respect and high regard we have for our women is evident in the increasing number of women we have

placed in leadership positions. We are aware of the importance of investing in our women folk, aware of the rich contribution they have to make.

It is not only in government that women are blazing a trail. Our boardrooms have seen a marked increase in women role-players – and it is our fervent hope that this trend will be accelerated in the future to produce women captains of industry.

We appeal to business to take our lead, as Provincial Government has exceeded the 30% target of women represented at all levels of decision making. In the past two years there has been an increase of women in Cabinet from zero to three. There has also been an increase of women Heads of Departments, from zero to seven. This means that a critical mass of seven out of 13 HODs are women. Furthermore, to generally promote the full decision-making capacity of women, the Office of the Premier has established a Women Development Programme to support and nurture women in management and leadership positions.

Empowerment programmes

Many departments have a variety of women-specific empowerment programmes, such as Zibambele, the Women Entrepreneur Empowerment Programme which assists women to establish businesses. The project also mentors business women, to promote sustainable and progressive businesses. At the other end of the scale, we have established numerous co-operatives to provide rural women with entry-level opportunities.

Making men accountable

And let us not forget the role of men in our interventions. What we need from our men and our boys is a commitment and a recognition of their responsibility and their duty towards every woman and every girl. It is the responsibility of every man or every boy to respect the life and the dignity of every woman and every

girl. If we observe this obligation as men, then our women will be able to enjoy their human rights. After all, the basis of every right is obligation or duty.

It is not enough to have the right Constitution, the right institutions and policies important as they are, without the right attitude of people in the society. Women and men must learn to have mutual respect and treat one another as equal partners. With the right attitude we would make great strides together.

Challenging an unjust legacy

It is our responsibility to thwart the conniving efforts of class, race and gender to relegate rural women to the bottom of the human rights and development hierarchy. In fact, the compounded effect of patriarchy, colonialism and discrimination has left for African women a legacy of deprivation almost unparalleled in the rest of the world.

Saartjie Baartman, who was paraded naked as a grotesque stereotype, is a case in point. In the words of our honourable President Thabo Mbeki: "The story of Sarah Baartman is the story of the African people. It is the story of the loss of our ancient freedom ... It is the story of our reduction to the state of objects, who could be owned, used and discarded by others."

I would like to leave you to ponder what a grave injustice it would be for all humanity if this legacy were to go unchallenged.

But before I do so, let me also take this opportunity to thank the veterans of the 1956 Anti-Pass March who have shared their experiences with us. They are a large-as-life reflection of the commitment of our women to the betterment of our country. While these extraordinary women have not come here seeking our praise, they richly deserve it. For it is them who KwaZulu-Natal's women can look to as role models to enhance the status and condition of women in our province.

