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Key note address by MEC Mahlakeng Mahlakeng, to the ``Women In Construction Indaba'' held at the Mafikeng Hotel School on Monday, August 24, 2009 to celebrate Women's Month....

Date: Monday, August 24, 2009

- Programme Director:
- Head of Department: Nic van Staden
- Senior Managers of the Department present
- Distinguished guests
- Ladies and Gentlemen

Good morning to you all. My special greetings to women gathered in this hall today. This is your day. This is your forum, your occasion and indeed, I feel honoured and very privileged to set the tone before you get down to the real business of today.

Programme Director:

The historical and political significance of the month of August in relation to our country cannot be overemphasized.

It is common knowledge to the majority by now, that August 09, which informs the reasons why you have gathered here, will for generations to come, stand out.

Stand out to celebrate the heroines and the pivotal role played by women in the liberation of our country.

Wathint' abafazi! Wath' intimbokodo! Malibongwe! Igama labafazi!

Contrary to many assertions, the majority of black women have never been spectators in the struggle for their emancipation, as well as freedom in South Africa.

Our proud and rich history about women's resistance may be well documented.

I agree.

However, we cannot suddenly become tired, or shy away from talking about the sacrifices that women freedom fighters made for this freedom that we enjoy.

Many of our women, who never even made head-line news, risked their lives so that one day, you and I, all of us, could live in a free, non-racial, non-sexist and democratic South Africa.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Fifty (50) years may be a very long time ago indeed when more than 20 000 courageous South African Women marched to the Union Buildings in protest against apartheid and pass laws.

The story has been told over and over again, but footprints left during that march, led in the forefront by stalwarts Lillian Ngoyi, Nyembe, Rahima Mossa, Albertinah Sisulu and many others including our own, Mme Ruth Segomotsi Mmpati, cannot and will not, be allowed to disappear.

In fact, Mme Mompoti, also a veteran of the ANC Women's League, is currently the

Mayor of Naledi Local Municipality in Vryburg.

In recognition of her role and contribution to the struggle, her birth place is today called, Dr Ruth Segomotsi Mompati districts.

It is therefore incumbent on all of us, here and elsewhere, to continue spreading our rich history irrespective of whether the story has been told before.

Christians also do go to church and worship every Sunday at least. They sing the same songs they sang before, from the same hymnbook.

They read verses they have read before and heard about from the scriptures. Yet, they continue to go to church once generation after the other.

Programme Director:

To live is to choose. But to choose well, you must know who you are and what you stand for, where you want to go and why you want to get there.

All these can only happen when we know our history.

The theme for this year's Women's Month Ladies and Gentlemen is:

``Together, Empowering Women for Development and Gender Equity''.

The National Women's Day or Women's Month as I explained is not a commercial or frivolous period. I may be preaching to the converted here but it is important to note that it is a period of solemn reflection.

A reflection on how far we have come and what else we must do to ensure the full participation of women in all spheres of life.

But why women and specifically, black or designated women?

I cannot find a more accurate explanation, than that made by one of the revered former ANC president, Oliver R Tambo. In articulating the plight of women he said:

"One of the fundamental tasks that the process of national liberation confronts is the liberation of the women of our country from their triple oppression on the grounds of sex, class and colour."

That is why in our freedom, we must look at how we can speed up the implementation of programmes that will improve the lives of thousands of women who live in abject poverty.

Women empowerment and gender parity is not about numbers.

Yes, out of 33 management positions I have at least 10 women as senior managers in the department. It is not bad but we should talk more than just numbers.

The point I want to emphasize is:

It has to be about opening space up. The space for women to influence meaningful change and make a difference in society.

It is also not about empowering elite women to occupy senior positions in society and government.

It is about changing the lives of millions of ordinary women in urban as well as in rural settlements.

That message should be amplified loudly and repeatedly so that if there are those among us or elsewhere who chose to misunderstand should hear us at last.

I am informed that this is the third engagement between yourselves and the department on matters involving construction.

I am informed, that central to previous engagements were complaints that women were not awarded big tenders. There were issues about some black women used as fronts by established companies so as to get business and many other issues.

May I say, government and that includes my department is about service delivery. Our mandate was never and will never be to make people wealthy or rich.

As one of our many stake holders and in partnership, together we can do more to achieve the priorities of Government.

We can and have to create sustainable livelihood through job creation and pushing back the frontiers of poverty.

The last time you interacted with this Department, we only heard about the global economic meltdown in the United States of America and Europe.

None of us ever imagined that the impact thereof will have unprecedented consequences at the scale we are witnessing here at home.

We have been hit by a tornado.

Jobs are being shed in the mining and manufacturing sectors like trees shedding leaves in an autumn wind.

Our people are being squeezed into abject poverty as the economy shrinks.

All this, happens during a regime change which is yet to fulfill its mandate against huge expectations, including your expectations here.

It is against this background, that I want to appeal for a mind shift during your deliberations today.

From harping too much on issues like, what is in for me, to how can you help this department to fulfill its mandate.

You can help us make a difference to enable us to speed-up service delivery.

Therefore, it becomes your responsibility also not just Government, to start asking questions as patriots:

What is it that we as women in construction who are doing business with government, can do for my country especially during hard times like these.

Not what this department can do for me. This is not a forum or consultation to network to get a government contract.

I do not want to break your hearts but:

Very soon, we may even have to reprioritize, by scaling down tremendously on programmes and divert resources previously allocated to those programmes to key projects aimed at addressing pressing issues like job creation, fighting poverty and rural development where our women are subjected to abject poverty in their majority:-

Particularly, taking into account that passion with which our State President, Jacob Zuma, attach to rural development.

What we are saying is Government cannot be seen to be failing its people.

Programme Director:

Included in my brief is to reclaim back our mandate as Public Works. We are moving and this will create a platform for women in construction to showcase their skills in building and maintaining our quality infrastructure.

Programme Director:

Gender equality is more than a goal in itself. It is a precondition for meeting the challenge of reducing poverty, promoting sustainable development and building good governance. In fact more countries have understood that women's equality and empowerment is a prerequisite for development.

Empowerment and affirmation of women has emerged as a defining feature of our democracy as evidenced also by the visible number of women entrusted with positions of leadership in the public sector.

This has also been translated to the empowerment of women projects and some women will share their strategies, their strife and toil on ensuring that their voices are heard and efforts recognized.

For example, we will very soon fast track Phase 2 of Expanded Public Works Programme which in my view is very significant also for women employment and economic development and towards improving the quality of life especially in our rural communities.

Perhaps this was an oversight but I would have appreciated if effort was made to include women from our villages, informal settlements to fit and contribute.

The black women who also bear the brunt of neglect and service delivery backlogs in our townships.

Eradicating the legacy of discrimination, inequality, service backlogs and fighting poverty requires the contributions that women can make to the national effort for faster and shared growth and development.

Our freedom is diminished as long as women remain outside the mainstream of our economy.

Our democracy is incomplete as long as women are subjugated to the periphery and are not on an equal footing in our social and cultural spheres of life.

Our human rights are violated as long as women are reduced to second class citizenship subject to domestic violence and abuse.

In conclusion Programme Director:

My department will establish a structure within our Special Programme Directorate shortly. This we do so that there is consistency, monitoring and follow-up to issues you raise with us for possible implementation.

This unit will assist this process so that we do not meet year after year talking the same things differently without a solution. In the final analysis, whatever the very real benefits of investing in women, the most important fact remains.

Women themselves have the right to live in dignity, in freedom from want and freedom from fear.

Allow me Programme Director before I step-down from this podium, to also express my disgust in the manner the International Association of Athletics Federation (IAAF), has treated our 800m gold medalist, Mokgadi Caster Semenya.

One wonders, if this furore would have been so intense, had she come last in that race. I am of the view that IAAF and those adding to the chorus , should have handled this matter differently and treated this athlete from Limpopo who will be touching down tomorrow, with respect. I wish you well in your deliberation. Have a good day.

Ke a leboga.

Malibongwe! Igama labafazi!