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**Address of the President of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, on the
occasion of Women's Day: Ga-Motlatla, Ditsobotla Local Municipality,
North West Province**

Date: Saturday, August 09, 2008

- Programme Director,
- Minister of Arts and Culture, Pallo Jordan,
- Minister of Provincial and Local Government, Sydney Mufamadi,
- Premier of the North West, Edna Molewa,
- Mayors,
- Members of Parliament and Councillors,
- Leaders of the Progressive Women's Movement,
- Leaders of various women formations in the country,
- Honoured veterans and stalwarts of the women's movement,
- Your Excellencies, Members of the Diplomatic Corps,
- Our traditional and religious leaders,
- Distinguished guests,
- Fellow South Africans

This day, National Women's Day, is of great historical value to all of us as we continue to pursue our goal of a united, non-racist, non-sexist, democratic and prosperous South Africa which prides itself on the values enshrined in our Constitution.

As we commemorate this day, 14 years into a society based on the principles of equality and justice, we must reflect on the gains we have made together and the challenges that still remain as we continue to work for the building of an equal and non-sexist society.

We do this inspired by the example set by the countless heroines of our struggle such as Elizabeth Mafikeng, Getrude Shope, Ruth Mompoti, Mitta Seperepere, Bertha Mkhize, Lillian Ngoyi, Albertina Sisulu, Helen Joseph, Ida Mtwana, Ruth First, Florence Mophosho, Florence Matomela, Kate Molale, Hettie September, Sophie DeBruyn, Bertha Gxowa, Phyllis Naidoo, Violet Weinberg, Ray Alexander, Francis Baard, Dr Goonam Naidoo, Hilda Bernstein, Adelaide Tambo, Cissy Gool, Amina Cachalia, Epainette Mbeki, Annie Silinga, Winnifred Mangoane Nkobi, Tiny Nokwe, Regina Nzo, Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, Ama Naidoo, Dora Tamana, Dorothy Nyembe and many, many others.

On this National Women's Day we also take this opportunity to congratulate our own Judge Navi Pillay, who has been appointed by the UN Secretary-General, as agreed by

the United Nations General Assembly, as the new UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.

The courage, determination and heroism of the many women we have mentioned and other unsung heroines, and the central role of the masses of the women of our country in the struggle for liberation galvanised our newly elected democratic Parliament and Government in 1994 to put the critical matter of the emancipation and empowerment of women at the centre of the democratic order.

It is the same courage, determination and heroism that drive us to work to the best of ability in the spirit of Business Unusual so that together we can realise the clarion call: Power to the Women.

Because of our commitment to ensure Power to the Women, our governments and legislatures, at all levels, have made important progress in ensuring that women occupy their rightful place as leaders of our people. Indeed, this progressive advance has also had a positive impact on the private sector, organs of civil society and the rest of society.

While we are happy that our Parliament is ranked 10th out of 130 Parliaments in the world in terms of women's representation, we still have to do more so that, sooner rather than later, we become the leading nation with regard to this important benchmark.

43% of members of Cabinet are women. Four of the nine Provinces are led by women Premiers. At local government level, 40% of Councillors are women and three of our six metros are led by women Mayors.

Of importance is that we have already surpassed the initial target of 30% representation of women in decision-making structures called for in the SADC Declaration on Gender and Development.

We see this improving gender representation in government institutions not just as making up the numbers, but as a deliberate act of gender empowerment informed by the historical imperative of creating a truly representative, democratic and equal society.

As part of the struggle for the emancipation of women, Government Departments made commitments towards working both internally and through their programmes and policies to establish equal opportunities for women.

Consistent with the theme of Business Unusual and Power to Women, we also created an important organ, the National Gender Machinery, whose main function is to protect and promote women's rights.

The following structures, well known to all in our society, are part of this national machinery.

- * The Commission on Gender Equality
- * The Parliamentary Women's Group (PWG)
- * The Presidential Women's Working Group
- * The Office on the Status of Women located in The Presidency.

These are important structures whose purpose is to ensure that the government, the legislatures and the rest of society work in an appropriate manner to ensure women's empowerment and embark on programmes that further help our struggle for the emancipation and empowerment of women.

As we know, South Africa is a signatory to the Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Platform of Action (BPFA).

Because of this, over the years Government has worked hard to ensure that both the laws that are enacted as well as our expenditure patterns empower women and promote gender equity.

Among ourselves and for many years, we have agreed that issues pertaining to and affecting the lives of women have to be integrated into the comprehensive inter-sectoral strategies that seek to defeat poverty and underdevelopment. We have agreed that we must mainstream the objective of gender equality.

Part of our deliberate action to ensure gender equality includes giving priority to women in terms of services and economic opportunities provided by government.

Today I will not burden you with statistics. However I am proud and happy to say that we are making progress. The fact is that we are succeeding to place women in leading positions in both the public and private sectors.

However, more work should be done, especially in the private sector, to empower more women. This is particularly so in the areas of promotion to critical and strategic positions, as well as in training, mentoring and other forms of gender empowerment to ensure a speedy advancement of women in the private sector.

In all the things we do, the main challenge has always been the struggle against poverty and underdevelopment. As we know, today this challenge is made more difficult by the ever increasing prices, especially of food and fuel. These increases have had a knock-on effect on virtually every product, which is being, intensely, by women.

In response to these challenges and as part of our ongoing commitment to ensure a better life for all, the War on Poverty Campaign will be launched in all provinces this month. This is part of our commitment to do our work in a spirit of Business Unusual and Power to the Women.

Championed by the Deputy President, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, part of the brief of this Campaign is to identify the most deprived wards and households.

This Campaign will ascertain the needs of the poor and provide assistance and support in a co-ordinated and sustained manner.

Chairperson,

Providing poor and unskilled women with an opportunity to develop skills and become economically active will help many women to regain their dignity and achieve self-reliance and in this way, ensure their independence.

We are proud that many South African women have made a mark for themselves by proving that given the opportunity, nothing can stop those who have determination, passion and are themselves hardworking.

Because of the opportunities opened by our democracy, we have seen how women in this country have charted their way into professional fields that were once reserved for men, and in many instances performed much better.

As we meet at different venues to mark this Women's Day, let us all remember that the historical task of bringing about an equal society has not ended with the 14 years of our democracy.

All of us must keep up the fight decisively and speedily to address the gender imbalances that continue to characterise our society.

Among others, many women continue to face the responsibility of rearing up children as single parents.

Further, everyday we see and hear of reports of domestic violence and spousal abuse.

Violence against women violates the rights and undermines the dignity of our sisters, mothers and daughters. It undermines our democratic victory. It is contrary to the values of the Constitution, born of the blood shed by countless patriots, including women.

Six months ago, newspapers reported the sad story of the 27 years old Ms Gail Papli, a brilliant Master of Science student at the University of KwaZulu Natal in Pietermaritzburg, who was found brutally murdered in her flat.

As we celebrate our women on this day, we remember Gail and many others whose lives were brutally snuffed out through unacceptable criminal violence.

Equally, we would like to make an earnest appeal to community structures and in particular, families, to stand up against and report incidents of women and children abuse.

More often than not, rape and child abuse are committed by people who are known to the victims. Very often, some of the criminal perpetrators are husbands, fathers, relatives, family friends or acquaintances.

The continued perpetration of these barbaric acts of gender violence is an indictment on all of us and should, correctly, make us angry even as it propels us to intensify our efforts to end this social malaise.

Chairperson,

The hardest part of the journey of the emancipation of women lies ahead of us. The 14 years of democracy have indeed been a revelation, confirming our conviction that if we act with determination to eradicate the historical wrongs of our past, we would succeed to change the lives of all our people, including the women.

While we have professional women who are realising their dreams, most South African women still do not have enough resources to change their lives for the better.

Many of these women survive in the margins of our society because of exclusion from general education, skills development programmes, and access to other opportunities. Almost half of them live in rural areas and informal urban settlements. Many live in rudimentary habitats, only able to access inadequate services.

We know that significant number of women continue to confront social marginalisation in their homes, workplaces and communities. This must communicate the message to all of us that the 1994 Revolution has not yet realised its goals.

To achieve the goal of the emancipation and empowerment of women, and therefore the realisations of the goals of the Democratic Revolution of 1994, we need strong partnerships between government, the women's movement, civil society, trade unions, business and all other organised formations, including the faith communities.

We must, through co-operation, continuous dialogue, education and joint action inject greater urgency in our work practically to build a non-sexist society.

Today, on this National Women's Day, we must renew our pledge to realise our vision of a non-sexist and non-racial society in which women are equal and active partners in building a new South Africa, and real beneficiaries of the new socio-economic order.

I would also like to thank the many men who have over the years joined hands with our women to struggle for creation of a non-sexist society. The fact is that the men in our country can ever be free unless the women are free.

On behalf of our government and the nation, I extend our best wishes to all the women of our country for a happy Women's Day, and new victories in the struggle to achieve 'Emancipation, Empowerment, Equality and Eradication of Poverty'!

We have progressed a long way since August 9, 1956, the day of the historic Women's March of that year.

However, this historic march has not yet ended. With all hands on deck let us work together to ensure that we achieve the objective of the emancipation of the women of our country and the realisation of the goal - Power to Women!

Malibongwe igama lamakhosikazi!

Thank you.

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