

SPEECH BY EXECUTIVE MAYOR MATHABO MOKAPO, MATJHABENG LOCAL MUNICIPALITY ON THE OCCASION OF THE CELEBRATION OF WOMEN'S DAY: 9 AUGUST 2006.

Programme Director
Honourable Councillors
Distinguished Guests
Ladies and Gentlemen

Background

Today, 9 August 2006, the women and the people of South Africa celebrate National Women's Day. On this day 50 years ago women from all walks of life, organized under the banner of the Federation of South African Women and the ANC Women's League, marched to the Union Buildings to protest the extension of pass laws to women and demand an end to unjust apartheid laws that were infringing their rights.

The marchers delivered petitions with over a hundred thousand signatures. This march not only shook the apartheid Prime Minister, J.G. Strydom and his administration but also demonstrated the shared commitment of women to democratic change.

The pass laws affected women directly and indirectly. These and other apartheid laws tore families and undermined the basic fabric of communities. Over decades the pass laws for men meant that women were often separated from husbands, brothers, fathers and children. Then, the apartheid government decided to extend these pass laws to women as well. It was this further attempt to deepen the oppression of black women that triggered a campaign, which had as its objective, not only the repeal of the hated pass laws, but also the end of all apartheid laws.

The women's anti pass march of 1956 drew in support from African, Colored, Indian and White women throughout South Africa. It helped to reinforce the unity of women and strengthen the principle and practice of non racial organization.

Women's role in the struggle

Throughout the struggle women have played a critical role in both in the struggle for national liberation and the associated struggle for women's emancipation. They undertook militant campaigns against the apartheid regime. They participated in the underground and armed struggle. Many women suffered restrictions, imprisonment, torture and even assassination by the racist regime.

Although the 1956 march on the Union Buildings 50 years ago remains a potent symbol of the struggles of women, the reality is that women were engaged in struggle long before then. The women's anti-pass campaign of 1913 stands out as a remarkable moment in the early years of the national liberation struggle, where women were using strategies of mobilization and confrontation that were only adopted much later by the national liberation movement.

Women became increasingly involved in trade unions in support of democracy.

Women insisted in organizing strikes against the government. Through these defiant strikes women workers were able to learn effective methods of organizing and were exposed to the principle of non-racial worker solidarity.

Women were among the marchers of the Sharpeville massacre in 1960, where police opened fire killing 67 and wounding 186 people, including 40 women and 8 children. After the massacre the government banned the ANC and PAC and declared a State of Emergency. Massive arrests were made, and women led hunger strikes in jails to protest against the conditions in jail.

Women were also inspirational in the Crossroads saga in 1977, when the government wanted to demolish the camp and send the residents to former Transkei. In defiance of this the women organized the Cross Roads Women's Movement which was very active in organizing demonstrations and marches against the forced removal. Finally, in December 1978, the Government, under massive international pressure, announced that it would not force the residents to leave the area.

Throughout its years of struggle the liberation movement has steadfastly involved women in all its structures. Its ideals and the principles of the Freedom Charter reflect the commitment towards gender equality.

The achievements of democracy

The democratic breakthrough of 1994 was not only a victory in the struggle for non-racialism. It was also a victory in the struggle for a non-sexist society. The new democratic constitution guarantees equal rights for women. It further places a responsibility on government and on society to redress the discriminatory laws and practices which affected women over many decades.

The ANC-led government has passed numerous laws, policies and created institutions that seek to better the lives of the women of South Africa and all our people.

These laws include amongst others:

- Domestic Violence Act of 1998

This Act seeks to improve the protection of women in particular from physical or emotional violence and creates an obligation on the criminal justice system to ensure victims of domestic violence receive adequate protection from further abuse.

- Maintenance Act of 1998

This Act allows for women to have the power to take fathers responsible for their children's welfare to court.

- Unemployment Insurance Contributions Act of 2003

The purpose of the Unemployment Insurance Fund is to provide for unemployment, illness, maternity, adoption and dependant's benefits to employees.

Institutions are amongst others:

The commission on Gender Equality which is a statutory organ for overseeing the implementation of programmes on gender equality.

Institutional arrangements in the form of the Office on the Status of Women that is meant to redress imbalance with regard to issues of gender equity in the workplace.

At the primary health care level, reproductive health services have been expanded to include family planning, counseling and free access to contraception.

The Integrated Nutrition Programme assists pregnant women to maintain good levels of nutrition. Primary health care is free for pregnant women and children under six at state clinics and hospitals.

Policies amongst others are:

- Employment equity provisions

The progressive affirmative action programme introduced by the ANC-led government has also created opportunities for women in the working environment. Since 1994 black women made the fastest progress, increasing their number at executive level by 60% and seizing 20 000 new machine operator and assembly line jobs.

In terms of women in the public service, all women now qualify for a homeowners's allowance irrespective of their marital status.

The retirement age for both men and women is now 65 years.

The Department of Public Works introduced the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) which aims, among other things, to provide education and training to unemployed people, especially women, youth and rural communities and to increase their opportunities of becoming self-employed or entering the formal sector.

- Preferential procurement provisions

A number of targeted small, medium and micro enterprises have been established to ensure that businesses and women-owned enterprises in particular, get access to information, training counseling, markets and technology.

Challenges facing women

Even with these positive changes women still continue to face serious challenges.

Women continue to struggle for housing, security and comfort.

Women (especially black and rural) continue to face challenges of access to credit, ownership of land, educational opportunities and skills development.

South African women are under-represented at almost all levels of the workforce and are generally not as highly paid as the male counterparts.

Women are the strata that are mostly affected by underdevelopment, unemployment, poverty and HIV/AIDS.

Women need to be at the forefront of overcoming the divide between the two economies. The first economy is developed, globally integrated and modern, while the second is underdeveloped and marginalized. Many women, due to the legacy of apartheid and gender inequality, are highly concentrated in the second economy.

It is because of the significant challenges that still remain that the launch, this week, of the Progressive Women's Movement of South Africa is welcomed.

On this Women's Day - the 50th Anniversary of the historic march on the Union Buildings - I call upon you to embrace the principles of freedom, to recommit yourself to the struggle for gender equality and to play an active role in the fight against women abuse.

Conclusion

It is important at this point to stress that women constitute the bedrock of society (Mma ngwana o tsoara thipa ka bohaleng). For this reason therefore, the role that women continue to play in broader society will always be appreciated.

It is incumbent upon us as a municipality, in this new democratic dispensation, to ensure that we equip our women employees with technical skills in specialized fields like, Finance, Engineering, Project Management etc. In this light the Matjhabeng Local Municipality will be embarking on a conscious programme to enhance the skills of its women employees. It is our belief that this endeavor will impact positively among women employees with regard to issues of morale at the workplace.

Also, as the Matjhabeng Local Municipality we hope to improve communication between management and the workforce by holding regular consultations. This would be done as an acknowledgement of the fact that we cannot succeed without your contribution.

Thank you.

**COUNCILLOR MATHABO MOKAPO
EXECUTIVE MAYOR**