



Address by Public Protector Adv. Thuli Madonsela during the Higher Education Resource Services-SA Academy Opening Dinner in Cape Town, Western Cape on Sunday, September 09, 2012

“Women in Leadership”

***Programme Director and Chairperson of HERS-SA, Prof. Karen Esler;
Vice Chancellor of the University of South Africa, Prof. Mandla Makhanya;
Deputy Vice Chancellor of the University of Witswatersrand, Prof. Yunus Ballim;
Deputy Vice Chancellor of the University of Cape Town, Prof. Crain Soudien;
HERS-SA Director, Dr Sabie Surtee;
Members of the HERS-SA Board present;
Distinguished guests;
Members of the media;
Ladies and gentlemen;***

It is indeed a great honour and privilege to address you tonight. I am sincerely humbled by the HERS-SA leadership for believing that I have insights worth sharing with the HERS community on the subject of Women in Leadership. I am particularly grateful for the opportunity to contribute to HERS-SA's noble cause of addressing the critical shortage of women in senior positions in the Higher Education (HE) sector in South Africa. I have no doubt in my mind that the giant strides that have been made with regard to putting women in decision-making in the HE sector are partly due to the diligent contribution of HERS-SA in the last ten years. Today we have women such as Professor De La Rey, and others at the helm of leading academic institutions. Over the years we've had women such as Prof Mapule Ramashala and the Wits University's former Vice Chancellor Professor Norma Reid-Birley, among others also leading key HE institutions. Of course a lot still needs to be done but we have a lot to celebrate and young women today have a critical mass of role models. I can say without fear of contradiction that women in the HE sector today stand on shoulders of giants who pioneered the way under very difficult circumstances.

Perhaps due to my teaching background, including my brief stint in the HE sector, I have a tendency to commence with definitions. Pardon me for doing the same here. I also have a tendency to pose questions, some of which I answer while others I leave to the audience. I have decided to focus the following key questions:

- *What is leadership?*

- *Why is it important to have women in leadership positions in the HE sector and broader society?*
- *Do women in leadership positions face different challenges in comparison to men?*
- *What leadership lessons have I learned from women pioneers and my journey through life, particularly since becoming the Public Protector?*
- *How do women in leadership play a meaningful part in supporting and strengthening our constitutional democracy in the next phase of our nation building journey?*

The meaning of leadership

What is leadership? During a Public Protector Leadership and Team Building Retreat held under the theme “**Leading a Purpose Driven Organisation**” early this year, this question elicited as many responses as the number of participants. However, there were common threads in all the responses. One of those was the power to influence others or the act of influencing others. In my book on *Gender and Leadership*, I settled for a simple definition, which regards leadership as follows:

“Leadership involves the act of causing other people to move towards some goal or direction you desire, or to behave in a particular manner.”

Simply put, leadership involves influencing to embrace and successfully pursue a cause or vision. If we accept that leadership involves influencing people we must accept that being placed in a leadership position is not the same thing as being a leader. We must also accept that some people occupy top decision-making positions without ever stepping up to exercise leadership. This reminds me of a Women’s Leadership Seminar my sister and I hosted at the University of Pretoria more than a decade ago. One of the speakers, Adv Mojanku Gumbi, commenced her talk with the comment, ***“If you think you are a leader, look behind you. If no one is following then you are deluding yourself for the reality is that you are not a leader.”*** As women in decision-making trying to establish our foot prints as leaders, this was not exactly what we wanted to hear. We wanted to be told we were leaders. But as we reflected on her message throughout the seminar, it made a whole lot of sense.

The value of having women in leadership

The next pertinent question is why is it important to have women in leadership in the HE sector and other sectors of society?

Firstly having women in leadership is a human rights issue and specifically a matter of the right to equality. Women as human beings deserve to be treated with equal consideration. This is part of the right to equality entrenched in section 9 of the Constitution. When the Constitution promises to ***“Improve the quality of life of all citizens and free the potential of each person”***, that promise, which is found in the preamble, is made to all the women and men of South Africa.

Actively placing women in leadership also gives expression to the value of non-sexism, one of the foundational values of our democracy, which are enshrined in section 1 of the Constitution. Among the foundational values is ***“the achievement of equality”*** which places a positive responsibility on those in authority to actively promote equality. Active promotion of equality, includes positive measures to advance women, including putting them at all levels of decision-making in all areas of society.

The proposed Gender Equality and Women Empowerment Bill seeks to strengthen the regulatory framework for complying with the positive duty to promote gender equality. So does Chapter 5 of the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act, 4 of 2000. Incidentally this part of the Equality Act is yet to be implemented more than 12 years since the Act was enacted.

This takes us to the other key reason for women to be placed in positions of power. Former President Nelson Mandela once said the following:

“As long as outmoded ways of thinking prevent women from making a meaningful contribution to society, progress will be slow. As long as the nation refuses to acknowledge the equal role of more than half of itself, it is doomed to failure.”

As can be seen from former President Mandela’s thinking, putting women in position of power is about making full use of all our society’s human resources and harnessing diversity for common good. Currently, women comprise more than 52% of the population. Shutting women out of decision-making, means society has to limp without part of the human input that it needs to move forward. More importantly, women bring a different perspective, which in many instances is influenced by their own underdog status in society. In a sense women in leadership tend to act as agents of change, usually in pursuit of social justice.

From the time of Charlotte Maxeke, women brought empathy to their leadership. At the core of the demands of Charlotte Maxeke’s movement at the turn of the 20th century, was social justice for all of the marginalised in society, mainly children, women and migrant workers. The same applied to women activists in other parts of the world, among them Sojourner Truth and Lucretia Mott. In the United Nations, there is a movement currently pursuing the universalisation of access to education as a social leveller in society. This movement, which believes that every child, particularly the girl child, should be accorded equal access to education, is driven by women. Among the women leaders involved are Queen Noah of Jordan and Mrs Graca Machel.

I have also noticed that the Minister of Science and Technology, Ms Naledi Pandor is also passionately driving women’s access to and participation at all levels of decision-making in science and technology. It also turns out that Minister Pandor an alumni of HERS-SA. Her actions suggest she has not forgotten where she comes from or her mission as a woman in mainstream power.

Do women in leadership face different challenges to those faced by men?

My answer to the question whether or not women face different leadership challenges in comparison to men is yes and no.

Many of the challenges women in leadership positions face are gender based while others are the same as those faced by men. It is also true that even in respect of those challenges that men also face, women’s experiences are often compounded by historical gender imbalances and biases. For example new leaders will always be confronted with the challenge of managing the transition from the comfort zones that would have naturally set in under the preceding regime. There may be a backlash to changes especially if they force teams to stretch themselves further than before. However, gendered expectations may compound the process of leading change for women.

Women and men are both creatures of comfort zones. This includes the tendency to gravitate

towards the familiar. In the case of leadership, having men in authority is familiar. For some strange reason, for example, firmness is usually not reconciled with the nurturing leadership style expected from women. I refer to this as strange because nurturing is associated with stereotyping women as mothers. But this does not take into account that mothers nurture while exacting discipline in families. Perhaps it is a question of what kind of disciplinary measures are associated with mothers as opposed to those associated with fathers.

Being a voice for gender equality is also a challenge. Women in positions of power within the mainstream tend to fear that if they speak out on gender equality and women's rights, they will be as women's spokespersons and not the focal points of their portfolio. Balancing the two is a challenge. Some deal with the challenge better than others.

More importantly, though, you must agree with me that, as a general rule, women assume positions of leadership with a trust deficit. Each action they take or decision they make thereafter can either exacerbate or diminish the trust deficit. You must also agree with me that the default position when people are asked to nominate persons into key leadership positions is generally men. However, it is different in the case of organisations that are dedicated to the advancement of women or gender equality. Today I occupy the position of Public Protector because a women's organisation with a similar mission to HERS-SA, the South African Women in Dialogue (SAWID), nominated me. To prove that it is a paradigm question rather than the paucity of women leaders, organisations such as SAWID do not struggle to generate a number of potential incumbents for key decision-making positions in society. This was the case during my nomination.

A friend who works for a key Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) recently informed me about a team asked to informally suggest a leadership list for their next group of office bearers. She was sad that the team unashamedly brought back a list with men only. This also raises a question regarding what do women do in such cases. Do they accept the myth that there aren't any women that are ready to lead at the highest level of mainstream organisations? A related challenge arises when the odd woman makes it into tightly contested top positions in mainstream organisations. Does she accept the title of honorary man and regular gossip about the rest of women folk being not ready?

I have also noticed a worrying trend involving the stigmatisation of women leaders as having gotten their positions on account of sexual relations. I admit that where such allegations are true, that would be a violation of the Prevention and Combatting of Corrupt Activities Act. I get the feeling though that the accusation comes from lingering beliefs that women cannot make it on their own as they are not ready to lead. However, it is encouraging to note that such attitudes, although a source of worry, belong to a societal minority. Society has gone a long way towards judging each person on the basis of the content of his or her character rather than his or her gender, race or any other human quality. This was the vision of society espoused by Africa's first Nobel Peace Prize winner, Chief Albert Luthuli as early as 1963 and later by Martin Luther King Junior. This is a good place to proceed to the lessons I have learned.

What leadership lessons have I learned from women pioneers and my journey through life, particularly since becoming Public Protector?

This event comes in the wake of Women's Month, a month set aside to affirm our commitment to the equality of women and men. August is also a month when we review progress made in redressing historical gender imbalances in all areas of life, including the commitment to achieve equal representation of women and men in all structures and at all decision-making levels in

society.

More importantly though, Women's Month is a time when we commemorate the unparalleled leadership act of the women who led the iconic march of 1956 and the gallant act of all of the women who participated in that march.

Although proudly declaring themselves the rock of society that was ready to crush apartheid, the women of 1956 did not confine their demands to women's emancipation. They called for a just and inclusive society, where the potential of each person was freed and each person's dignity respected. This was in line with the Freedom Charter, which had been adopted the previous year and today this resonates with the preamble and spirit of our Constitution.

While delivering the 7th Helen Joseph Memorial Lecture at the University of Johannesburg recently, I recalled my encounter with one of the leaders of the iconic 1956 march, Helen Joseph. I specifically shared some of the unforgettable lessons I learned as a woman in decision-making from that encounter 23 years ago.

The gist of my story was how women graduated from tea-makers to decision-makers in the organisation that became Helen Joseph's political home for the rest of her life. Before proceeding I must indicate that there is nothing wrong with the physical act of tea-making by women, including those in decision-making when they so wish. I regularly make tea for my guests and I recently learnt that former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright did the same.

The fortunes of women changed, Helen Joseph said, the day women rebelled against making tea, and demanded a role reversal for the day. They asked the men to make tea while they took charge of the meeting. From that day on women were allowed to participate in the meetings. Though I never really verified this story, it would appear that, this historic moment is one of many that heralded women's rise from tea-makers to decision-makers. I must hasten to indicate that the need for corroborating evidence has nothing to do with my remarkable informant's integrity but owes to my weakness as a lawyer. As lawyers, we always require corroboration. I suspect that as researchers and scientists you too need some form of verification.

Today women enter and operate in leadership positions under different circumstances. For example, today there is a critical mass of women in HE leadership positions and other scarce skills sectors. In the judiciary, we now have a woman Judge President, a Deputy Judge President and many Regional Court Presidents and Chief Magistrates. Two constitutional institutions, the Public Protector and the Independent Electoral Commission, are headed by women. There are 2 women in the Constitutional Court. Representation in areas such as Parliament, the Cabinet, provincial legislatures and municipalities, is over 40% and approaching the 50% mark required by the African Union and the 50-50 representation of women and men expected in terms of the Southern African Development Community(SADC) Protocol on Gender and Development in respect of all structures and all levels in society.

But there are lingering challenges. Some should be addressed by society while others by women. Lessons learned from pioneers such as Charlotte Maxeke, Helen Joseph, Lillian Ngoyi and Albertina Sisulu, among others, may help women improve their leadership fortunes today. Incidentally I've been trying to capture these lessons in a book, initially titled "**No More Tea Makers**", for more than a decade. Key among those lessons, are the following:

- **Women must stand up for something.** If you stand for nothing you will fall for anything. If you have a vision, such vision serves as your compass directing your day to day decisions. It

also enables you to act as a voice of reason when your organisation goes astray. Women leaders such as Charlotte Maxeke and Helen Joseph were guided primarily by a quest for social justice.

- **Women must act and lead with authenticity.** For women to add value in mainstream organisations as was the case with Charlotte Maxeke, Helen Joseph, Lillian Ngoyi and others, they must act authentically. Authentic action does not always win you the popularity contest but it is the only way you can make a difference. The alternative is to act as a proxy. In that case nothing changes and your presence or absence does not matter. I often advise young persons that if you do not make a difference, you do not matter. This makes you easy to replace.

- **Women must act consistently.** One of the keys to making a difference lies in being dependable and acting with integrity. If you agree with people to act wrongfully against another, they get to know that your true character is that you can be swayed and used. Remember that if you act as a proxy, you are disposable as anyone can be a puppet. It again boils down to standing for something. If you act as a proxy people use you and abandon you. During my first meeting with the President of South Africa, President Jacob Zuma, he impressed on me how important it was to him and the country that I remain impartial in all my actions and decisions. He spoke about how his faith in our remarkable democracy was restored the day the Public Protector had the audacity to decide against the powers that be and uphold his complaint when he was down and out of power.

- **Women leaders must have integrity.** When Ma Albertina Sisulu passed on a while ago, “integrity” is one word that was universally used in all discussions about her. Integrity is one of the keys to consistency. It is also part of taking a stand. But the key to integrity is ensuring that you do what you say. It is difficult to follow a team leader who says one thing but does the opposite. I’m not suggesting a holier than thou attitude. At the level of governance in your institution, it does not mean that no one should drop the ball under your watch but it means that if you set rules you must comply with them and enforce them consistently. Honesty is an important part of integrity. If you have to keep telling people you are a person of integrity, chances are you are not. Also, if people always need a second person at meetings with you to corroborate what was said or need to record meetings to protect themselves from you, then you need to take frank look at yourself. Nobody wishes to follow someone who is unreliable. Again if you stand for something, it is easy to be reliable.

- **Women need to act courageously.** To act authentically and consistently, you need courage. A friend once told me of a conversation he had with a great leader, who is regarded as the Moses of South Africa. He said that the great leader said it was important for young people to have unquestionable loyalty to the organisation but that “unquestionable loyalty” should not be confused with “unquestioning loyalty”. Women leaders also need to have unquestionable loyalty to their organisations but not unquestioning loyalty. To be agents of change women often need to push their organisations or institutions beyond what is accepted as normal even though parochial and morally reprehensible. They often have to speak truth to power. This is exactly what women such as Charlotte Maxeke, Helen Joseph, Helen Suzman, Albertina Sisulu and Winnie Mandela among others, have done over the years.

- **Women need value based decision-making.** Courage is not an issue when your decisions are value based or principled. In my context as Public Protector, it is important that not only is justice done but that it is seen to be done. Consistency becomes absolutely important. In this regard, we have a simple immutable narrative that consists of four questions: What happened? What should have happened? Is there a discrepancy between what happened and what should

have happened and if so, does such discrepancy amount to maladministration? If yes, what would be an appropriate remedy or corrective action?

It is also important to my team and I that we understand and mediate the power imbalance between the state and ordinary persons. We also unashamedly give priority to “bread and butter” matters, thus staying true to the office’s role as a buffer between the mighty state and the ordinary citizen. But when we find no wrongdoing on the part of the state we say so. These days not only do I issue elaborate reports that seek to clarify the reasoning behind my decisions, I also issue reports even when the complaint is not upheld. This is important when a person’s character has been impugned through media discussions on the allegations. Complainants often run a media campaign on high profile complaints, particularly those relating to ethical conduct or integrity.

- **Excellence is a must for women leaders.** Earlier on we touched on the reality that women tend to start with a trust deficit. What we didn’t say is that persons from historically marginalised groups in society tend to be judged as representatives of the group their associated with. If a woman proves incapable, it is often not said that that specific person is incapable but that the entire sex is incapable of performing. Although it is not fair to be made to carry the sins of your whole group, complaining does not help. Oprah Winfrey once said that excellence is the best antidote to racism, sexism and other forms of prejudice. Excellence does not mean not making mistakes. It means giving everything you do your best shot.

- **Women leaders need to lead from both the front and behind.** Leaders often say *“I lead from the front by showing my team how it is done”*. Others would say that *“I lead from the back to allow my team the space to flourish”*. My own experience has taught me that I need to do both. The strategic question is to determine when it is appropriate to lead from either front or behind. I know for a fact that when bullets are flying or likely to fly, the team feels conformable if like Lilian Ngoyi, Helen Joseph, Sophie Williams De Bruyn and Rahima Moosa, you are there at the front with them. That strategy served me well as the full time Commissioner in the South African Law Reform Commission and has proved successful in my current position.

- **Women leaders need to maintain a learning and growth attitude.** It is said that the moment you stop growing you are dying. You can never say you have reached a point when you have all of life’s answers. Every member of your team can teach you something and so can any person in society. In fact even a child can provide a key to your next phase with regard to growing as a person and as a professional. The reports I issue are based on my decision alone. However, the input comes from team research and various discussions, including a session called a Think Tank.

- **Women leaders need to replicate themselves.** Author of Jesus CEO, Laurie Beth Jones, regards the ability to replicate oneself as a leader as one of the keys to Jesus’ effectiveness and sustainability as a mortal leader. I have found that teams listen better when one of their own articulates institutional strategies, values and other matters that need to be attended to by all. In any event, it is important that when you leave an institution, it does not revert to the comfort zone you found it in.

- **Women leaders need to communicate effectively.** There’s an African proverb that says a person who cannot communicate walks alone. Communication is an important tool for replication. It is also important for stakeholder management. Often it does not matter whether you are right or wrong, it is the perceptions that count. My office uses communication a lot. For this we thank the Constitution for section 10 on freedom of expression, which includes freedom of the media. We are also grateful to the media itself for embracing my office’s work and

facilitating dialogue on our activities and decisions.

With a total institutional budget of R170million for 20 offices that serve the entire state of South Africa, including local government, parastatals and persons exercising public power, advertising is not a viable option. Our communication efforts seek, in part, to comply with my office's responsibility to be accessible to all persons and communities as envisaged in section 182(4) of the Constitution. Effective communication is also important for team building and entrenching shared organisational values. In stakeholder communication, perceptions rule and managing perceptions effectively is a non-negotiable. At a recent meeting, a woman I've known and respected for a long time had an unexplained go at me. Even when my briefing touched on things you expected her side to embrace, which her colleagues did embrace, she somehow ended up with a warped view of what I had said. I patiently tried to explain myself at great length despite her persistent hostile body language. In the end it was clear to me that it was not about the meeting and whatever I said there did not make any difference. In cases like this I find opportunities to engage without an audience as audiences tend to encourage posturing. Managing perceptions though does not mean departing from your core values and principles. In my case those are immutable as they derive from the Constitution and the law.

• **Women Leaders need to inspire.** Another key to replication is inspiration and in fact, influence generally. It is important that your words and deeds not only inspire belief and action towards a shared vision but also that hope for a better future is inspired. Now more than ever, we need to inspire all, particularly young people that their actions matter in creating the future and society they want. They also need to have faith that a better future is not only possible but that such future starts now with their own action. This applies in regard to challenges such as unemployment, disease and corruption. Difficult quests are not possible without hope.

• **Women leaders need persistence and resilience.** Despite all efforts, things do not always work out. It is important to accept that life and people are not the way they are supposed to be but the way they are. Your vision and values will carry you through when life does not seem to go the way you want or anticipated. Patience, persistence and resilience are the key to success in life. It is also important to understand that people have different purposes in life and not to unfavourably compare yourself against those that appear to have found the key to success faster. Success is living up to your own full potential with the cards you were dealt with and not living someone else's life.

Women in leadership positions need to step up now more than ever to play their part in supporting and strengthening constitutional democracy. As they do so, their own fortunes as leaders will be improved.

To all women in this room and elsewhere, I leave you with the following quote from Marianne Williamson:

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frighten us.”

**Adv TN Madonsela
Public Protector of the Republic of South Africa**