



Address by Public Protector Adv. Busisiwe Mkhwebane during a Women's Month event in Middleburg, in Mpumalanga on Thursday, August 31, 2017.

**Programme Director;
Women Executive Mayors in the Nkangala District;
Women Speakers;
Chief Whips;
Members of the Mayoral Committees;
Councillors;
Women Municipal Managers;
Traditional Authorities;
Civil Society Leaders;
Civil servants;
Distinguished guests;
Ladies and gentlemen;**

Good evening!

Allow me to preface my message by expressing my sincerest gratitude to the organisers of this dinner for seeing it fit to invite me to speak to you this evening.

My team and I are humbled by the vote of confidence in us and the apparent appetite for what we have got to say.

A very big thank-you to you. We trust that our presence here will add value to the overall objectives of this function.

A month and a half ago, the world rolled up its sleeves to do good for humanity as part of International Nelson Mandela Day. That important campaign is observed annually under the motto: "Make Every Day A Mandela Day".

This is an extremely critical message. It calls on every member of the global community to dedicate at least 67 minutes of their time, every single day of their lives, towards humanitarian work, with a view to making the world a better place.

In other words, the motto urges all of humankind to go beyond just giving their time on 18 July. It challenges us to go beyond that and ensure that we perform charitable causes 365 days per annum.

This is indeed an important point. It ensures that we care all the time and not just on the anniversary of the birth of our iconic former President, Nelson Mandela.

Now, today marks the culmination of the 23rd Women's Month since the inauguration of the campaign to pay tribute to the heroines that spearheaded the historic women's march to the Union Building on 09 August 1956.

Every other day during the past month, events such as today's have been held in different places across the land, where South Africans were in unison in their condemnation of the oppression of women as it manifests itself in various forms.

These include gender violence such as rape and assault; gender discrimination such as unequal pay for the same amount of work, disempowerment of women by excluding them from positions of authority; and condemning women to a life of poverty by not affording them enough opportunities in the running of the economy.

To illustrate these points, many including myself, quoted statistics and survey findings to put our points across.

Regrettably, for us as women, the 31st of August means that the spotlight shifts from issues pertaining to the plight of women at least until mid-November when we will be revisiting the matter of the emancipation of women as part of the 16 Days of Activism for No Violence Against Women and Children.

This will be the case despite the fact that women bear the burden of oppression and discrimination on their backs all year round and society seems to think this is the way to go.

A clear example can be drawn from an audio recording that did the rounds on social media following an incident in which a member of the executive was alleged to have assaulted a woman at a night spot earlier in the month.

In the recording, a man alleging to be a relative of the alleged victim of the violent attack was speaking over the phone with a man that was purported to be the member of the executive concerned.

The man emphasized the point that it was wrong for the member of executive to have assaulted, as alleged, the women concerned during Women's Month.

Although he may not have meant it that way, the implied message or the subtle undertone coming out of the man's words was that it would have been okay or acceptable for the woman to be assaulted on any other month – so long as it was not August.

This could be the motivation for making every day a Women's Day, as in the case of Mandela Day. This could be the reason why we urgently need to declare every month a Women's Month.

The point I am trying to underscore here is that women's issues do not cease to be important on August 31st. If we are to succeed in liberating women from the shackles of gender violence and discrimination, the plight of women must be put high up on the national agenda every day, every week, every month, every quarter, every semester and every year.

There is already a recognition that women are perpetually on the back foot. There is an acknowledgement that in this masculine world, women always have to work twice as hard as their male counterparts to progress in every sphere of life.

This is evident in the global, continental and country legal frameworks and policy. At the level of the globe, for instance, we have the Sustainable Development Goals, which our country has signed up for.

Goal 5 thereof calls on the 193 United Nations members states, including South Africa, to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls by 2030.

At continental level, we have Agenda 2063, a progressive plan that was authored by our very own Dr. Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma during her tenure at the helm of the African Union Commission.

One of the 7 Aspirations of the Agenda is the realization of “an Africa whose development is people driven, relying on the potential offered by people, especially its women and youth and caring for children” by 2063.

Here at home, we have the National Development Plan (NDP), which states unequivocally that: “Although progress has been made to improve the lives of women; discrimination, patriarchal attitudes and poor access to quality education persists.”

It continues that: “The plan deals with these factors holistically, recognising that key priorities such as education or rural development will have the biggest impact on poor women.”

For us in South Africa, the NDP supplements the progressive legal framework that is already in place.

Laws such as the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act, Employment Equity Act, Maintenance Act, Domestic Violence Act, coupled with the Right to Equality, which is enshrined in the Bill of Rights, under Chapter 2 of the Constitution, are among the legal instruments available to us emancipate women.

And yet despite all of these, we still find ourselves in this dark space, with no end in sight. The question is: what shall we do as Women of Courage?

Perhaps the starting point would be to understand what we mean by “Women of Courage”. Let us first define the operative word here which is “courage”.

Dictionary definitions of “courage” include “the ability to do something that frightens you” or showing unwavering “strength in the face of pain or grief”. It also refers to an act of bravery.

As I told women in KwaMhlanga earlier in the month, we are fortunate as South African women that plucking the courage to face our demons will not be synonymous with entering uncharted waters. Those that came before us already been down this route.

And so, in line with our indigenous teachings that tell us that “indlela ibuzwa kwabaphambili”, we may need to take from those in whose names we commemorate this month.

As we all know, this month 61 years ago, a 20 000-strong contingent of South African women from all walks of life – some with babies on their backs – took matters into their own hands and marched on the Union Buildings with a list of demands in relation to the oppressive pass laws that were, back then, the order of the day.

Though they did not immediately get their way, they managed to send a very strong message to the corridors of power and to society at large. It was an unambiguous message that said: We are not a bunch of defenseless objects of pity. We are very much capable of standing up for ourselves and our families, and this is one such step.

To say the corridors of power in Prime J.G Strijdom’s government were stunned would be an understatement. They were shaken and taken aback.

Those inspirational women, among them Lilian Ngoyi, Helen Joseph, Rahima Moosa and Sophie Williams-DeBryun, took that courageous step when it was the most dangerous thing the oppressed masses of our people could ever do.

You will recall that, in subsequent years, those that dared to protest against that evil system of apartheid were met with fire power as the police opened fire, mowing down the protestors in their hundreds while maiming many others.

While women, today, still find themselves having to jump through many hoops on their route to liberty, the conditions are different in that we can now mobilise and say peacefully to government “this far and no farther”.

But why are we not doing that? Why are we seemingly comfortable in victimhood?

We need to ask ourselves the tough questions. Why is that the prospect of a woman president – whoever that woman may be – causing such as heated debates in the country when it is a fact that women have always been ready to lead from as far back as the times of August 1956, let alone the struggle led by the likes of Charlotte Maxeke?

Why is it that it is only this province of Mpumalanga and its neighbour, Limpopo, where we have never had a woman Premier? Is it that there are no capable women leaders here or does the problem lie in that, unlike our 1956 counterparts, women here lack the courage to raise their hands and avail themselves to lead from the front?

I am here to say to you: Let us be our own liberators. Our challenges are not going to disappear because some man – “a knight in shining armour” – is on his way to rescue and set us free.

Our problems are going to disappear only when we, as women, stand up and fight for our place; when we become our own liberators. Until then, breaking through that ceiling is going to remain a pipe dream.

Let this year’s conclusion of Women’s Month mark the launch of our intensification of the struggle to free women from the bondage of patriarchy, with us as women leading the way.

Let us make every day a Women’s Day. Let every month be Women’s Month.

In the words of renowned author, Marianne Deborah 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 frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, and fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people will not feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to manifest the glory of God that is within us. It is not just in some of us; it is in everyone and as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give others permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.”

Thank you.

**Adv. Busisiwe Mkhwebane
Public Protector of South Africa**