



Address by Public Protector Adv. Busisiwe Mkhwebane during a Woman of Influence Network (WOINET) Women's Month event at KJM Place, KwaMhlanga, in Mpumalanga on Saturday, August 19, 2017.

**The Mayor of Thembisile Hani Municipality, Cllr Nomsa Mtsweni;
WOINET Chairperson, Ms. Lindiwe Magobholi;
The rest of the WOINET leadership
WOINET members
Distinguished guests;
Ladies and gentlemen;**

Good afternoon!

I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to the Woman of Influence Network (WOINET) for extending an invitation to my office to participate in this commemoration of Women's Month.

It is, indeed, an honour and privilege to have been granted a platform to share my thoughts on the important subject of matters concerning women in South Africa today.

I am also thankful for the invite because my being here helps a lot in making the Public Protector accessible to the people as envisaged in section 182(4) of the Constitution.

As some of you might be aware, my office is one of the resources that our constitutional democracy has availed to you to ensure that you get an improved quality of life and a freed potential by holding your government to account.

We help you do that by investigating, reporting on and remedying improper conduct such as maladministration in all state affairs.

This covers undue delays in the processing of applications for RDP houses, social security grants, birth certificates, identity documents, workmen's compensation, Unemployment Insurance Fund and so on and so forth.

These are matters that affect people at the grassroots. And these are people we want to help, for we believe they, too, deserve a taste of the fruits of freedom and democracy. This is in line with Vision 2023, a grand plan that is going to inform my operations as Public Protector throughout the course of my term of office.

We also investigate abuse of power, abuse of state resources, unlawful enrichment and corruption. It is our belief that resources that are lost to the public purse as a result of any of these maladies are tantamount to stealing from the poor.

For more information, kindly ensure that you visit our stall at the back of this hall. There, you will find brochures and newsletters with information on how you can contact us for help should you need to be freed from the trappings of maladministration.

Coming back to what has brought me here today, you and I meet at a time when society is engaged in a robust debate in the wake of the wave of violence that has been visited upon women in our country in recent days.

For a while society had managed to forget how hostile South Africa can be to women.

It had been a few months since the acts of barbarism that flared up in April and May, where lifeless and sometimes charred bodies of young women would be found hidden bushes in some parts of the country.

All of the victims had been killed, allegedly, by their male partners. The outrage expressed at the time had, until this week, quietly disappeared from public discourse.

Now the topic of violence against women revisited us. This time around, it is the alleged acts of prominent figures that has brought the topic back on the national agenda.

The reportage of these shameful acts has only come to the fore because of the alleged perpetrators' social standing. Unfortunately, their alleged actions mirror what happens in many low-profile households across the country.

But there are no surprises here.

As South African women, we live in a very masculine society. It is a society that seems adamant that a woman is inferior to a man. It is a society that says "we are not equal"; it's men first and women later.

Year in and year out; during the month of August, we crunch numbers.

How many women are there in Cabinet? How many are Premiers? How about in Parliament or the Judiciary? What about those that hold chairperson and director positions in Johannesburg Stock Exchange-listed companies? Not to forget pay disparities between females and their male counterparts, with whom they perform the same amount of work!

And then it's the *oohs* and the *aahs* as we express shock at the fact that many years post freedom and democracy, we still speak of an untransformed society that remains as patriarchal as ever.

But as soon as the sun has set on the last day of Women's Month, everybody gets on with their lives and forgets all about the scourge of gender disparity, intolerance and violence that has haunted our female population, young and old alike, from time immemorial.

The conversation dies a slow death until it is revived later on in the year when we observe the 16 Days of Activism for No Violence against Women and Children. And then its silence again until next August.

We have become too much of a predictable society. It's a routine. Each time it happens, it gives one the feeling of *Déjà Vu*. The feeling of "we have been here before" and yet we do not seem to be able to go beyond this point. We have come to sound like a scratched record that keeps on repeating the same line over and over. Until someone skips the song concerned, the CD player remains stuck on that one line.

There are various reasons why things remain the way they are. Among the factors leading to the current state of affairs is the apparent lack of courage to implement the many progressive legal instruments that are at our disposal or a snail's pace approach at transforming society.

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 to regain lost ground. But it is still "not yet Uhuru" for many women across the land.

That said, I am not here to moan and groan. I want to suggest to you that, perhaps, the key to our emancipation as women lies in the idea of being our own liberators. I am here to tell you that, as women, you can stand on your own two feet and take the fight to the source of your discomfort. You are naturally blessed with that ability.

It is either that or you submit to the enemy and play victim. I say let us choose the former. Let us pick ourselves up and be our own liberators. We are all we have.

The encouraging factor about this approach is that it is unlike entering uncharted waters. It is not a novel idea. While, most of the time, it may seem like a "where angels have feared to tread" situation, it is certainly not.

Our forebears, the women of 1956, have been there before and they triumphed, albeit decades later. They are the reason the first democratically elected administration, in 1994, declared August 09 National Women's Day. Their heroics inspired the declaration of that day as a public holiday.

As you know, on that day 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 get their way straightaway, 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 suits in the high echelons of Prime J.G Strijdom's government were stunned would be an understatement. They were shaken to the depths of their very being.

Those inspirational women, among them Lilian Ngoyi, Helen Joseph, Rahima Moosa and Sophie Williams-DeBryun, took the 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?

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 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.

In the words of renowned author, Marriane 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**