



**MINISTRY OF DEFENCE
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA**

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OPENING REMARKS: DOD GENDER STRATEGIC SEMINAR

31 AUGUST 2011

PARATUS HALL: ARMY COLLEGE

PRETORIA

Allow me to extend a warm welcome to all of you, as we collectively embark upon a journey of exploration, commencing the process of dialogue in exploring this year's national theme for Woman's Month for 2011, "*working together to enhance women's opportunities to economic empowerment*".

This is the theme which has been interrogated throughout the month of August, by men and women in all sectors of South African society.

It is therefore highly appropriate, some seventeen years into our Democracy, that we, as the strategic leadership cadre of the Department, apply ourselves systematically to reflecting on our own contribution in furthering the agenda of gender transformation, not only in our ambit, but more broadly within the social power relations of our society.

It is of note, that the theme for 2011 has directed itself specifically to the aspect of *economic empowerment*.

Colleagues,

In calling upon us to focus on the matter of economic empowerment, we give recognition to the fact that power relations are far broader than merely placing women in positions of authority, and in obtaining nominal representation in boardrooms the country over.

Rather, we are called upon to address the deepest structures of our societal relations within our context as South African men and women.

This is a focus which has at its centre the aspirations and Visions of a Developmental State, a concept which is central to the strategic leadership intent of our Government.

While many are well acquainted with this concept, suffice to say, a Developmental State is underpinned by an intent which is directed at fundamental grass-roots realities such as the alleviation of absolute and relative poverty, the correction of glaring inequalities of social conditions and the removal of the degradation associated with inequality and the daily struggle for access to basic resources and amenities.

There is little need to repeat the much known fact that within our society, it is most frequently women who experience these harsh realities most acutely.

While statistics paint an accurate picture of societal inequality, numbers fail to adequately capture the complexities of the routine suffering which characterises the lives of so many.

One needs simply to make a short journey through the centre of any busy Metropolis in our Country, and bear painful witness to the harsh realities of the cycles of poverty

and social inequality in which so many of our women and girl-children are situated.

We, as a strategic leadership cadre, are called upon to respond at the most authentic level to addressing this matter, in a manner which sees sustainable and meaningful gender transformation at every level of our society. To fail to do so, is to fail the very Constitution and Freedom Charter on which our Democracy is founded.

Our departure point is perhaps well situated within the statement of commitment of Government, specifically regarding Woman's Month for 2011.

This has, amongst others, acknowledged our historical inequities as men and women, and the resultant limiting of development opportunities and broad representation.

Our Government intent has articulated itself in recognising our achievements as a Nation in ensuring representation of

women in all sectors and levels of society, while acknowledging that more is required.

It has also sought, once again to affirm the appointment of women into management positions in both Government and State-owned enterprises, while recognising the need for similar transformation in the private sector.

To accelerate this aspect, as well as that of compliance to the attainment of 50/50 gender parity, it has given direction for the promulgation of a Gender Equality Bill.

These affirmations are most valuable, having at their root, the tangible desire to give real voice to the voiceless, and to secure the participation, economically and socially, of women and men as equal and fair participants within the framework of our Constitutional Democracy.

These are affirmations which bear witness to the wisdom so well-articulated by the first President of our Country, in his narrative of his life, when he stated that

“It was during those long and lonely years that my hunger for the freedom of my own people became a hunger for the freedom of all people, white and black. I knew as well as I knew anything that the oppressor must be liberated just as surely as the oppressed. A man who takes away another man's freedom is a prisoner of hatred, he is locked behind the bars of prejudice and narrow-mindedness. I am not truly free if I am taking away someone else's freedom, just as surely as I am not free when my freedom is taken from me. The oppressed and the oppressor alike are robbed of their humanity”.

Nelson Mandela

Colleagues, the journey on the path for gender transformation is an indelible component of our collective humanity.

And in embarking on this collective journey, we will unleash for ourselves the most powerful river of change imaginable.

Reflect for a moment on this power of the voice of the women of South Africa.

This is a voice which has been demonstrated repeatedly, but perhaps was at its most vocal on 09 August 1956. On this day, women of all races and ages of our country, united by their frustration at the injustices of the time, and filled with the longing to secure a better future for their children, born and unborn, took to the streets.

These women marched in peaceful protest to the Union Buildings to deliver petitions which reflected their despair at the limitation placed on their lives and liberty by the pass laws of the time.

This visible protest served at one level to champion the amendments of the legal restrictions of the society of the time.

However, at a far deeper level, it demonstrated once and for all the power of the collective voice of women, the immense longing for a society where life and liberty could be enjoyed by all, and the vast strength and courage to be found in the mothers and daughters of the nation. Truly, this was indeed a demonstration that *to strike a woman, is to strike a rock.*

This is a voice which has through the decades, given meaning where there was only confusion, and which has cast light where there are only shadows. It is the voice of opportunity, it is the voice of possibility, the voice of hope.

It is a voice which cannot and must not be silenced.

Colleagues, this is a voice which longs to be heard, and our task, at its most simple, is to seek collectively the very best strategy to allow this voice to emerge to its fullest potential.

To fail to do so, is to deny our nation the joy of the most glorious song possible – the song of a society rejoicing in collective prosperity and opportunity, a song which yearns only to be audible, and a song which speaks of that true freedom, a freedom which rings from the hilltops, which resounds across the heavens and which echoes into the very depths of the oceans.

Colleagues, as we journey forward in this dialogue today, let it be always in search of that glorious voice of collective freedom, that true music of the heavens.

This is surely the music which must stand as our legacy, a legacy which has sought always to bear witness to life and