

Generals, Senior Officers, Officers, Warrant Officers, Non-commissioned Officers, Soldiers, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen

I am honoured to be granted the privilege of your audience to address this august gathering that marks 61 good years since the historic protest march to the Union Buildings in 1956 against repressive pass-laws by over 20 000 women of substance whose noble activism we seek to emulate.

Those women spoke truth to power and despite the grave threat of violence by the illegitimate apartheid government, their selfless activism could not allow them to sit back and tolerate oppression. Those women - united in their diversity - defied the apartheid state machinery, some with babies on their backs, in the quest for justice and equality for all. Such is the strength of a woman.

Cognisant of the clear and present danger that the brutal regime posed to their safety and that of their families, the heroines of 1956 soldiered on in pursuit of justice and they prevailed. Their actions struck an emotional but terrific blow to the brutal apartheid government and added a necessary impetus to the struggle for freedom and equality in our country. Such was the turning point their actions effected.

When I speak of these heroines of the glorious women's army, I speak of Lilian Ngoyi, Sophia Williams-De Bruyn, Rahima Moosa, Helen Joseph, Albertina Sisulu, Motlalepula Chabaku, Bertha Gxowa and many others.

These remarkable heroines vowed as inscribed in the petition they presented during the march, to never "rest until we have won for our children their fundamental rights of freedom, justice, and security", and true to the power and resourcefulness of us as women, our forebears fulfilled that promise.

It is against the backdrop of this illustrious history that I want us to focus our undivided attention to the still vast challenges that confront women and girl children today; the challenges that we continue to grapple with and that continue to hold us back as descendants of great warrior women of the class of 1956.

As women we still are by-and-large the bearers of a heavy burden of poverty, unemployment, inequality, disempowerment, workplace marginalisation, sexual exploitation, domestic abuse and unrelenting sexism, and we need to join hands, support one another and use the good laws of our country that the class of 1956 made possible - to defend ourselves and reclaim our place of honour in society.

As women, we need to desist from depending heavily on men to reach self-actualisation but be more independent and assertive about our destiny in society, because we are powerful Queens and Princesses on whose shoulders the future of our nation rests.

As we equally recognise our roles as mothers, sisters, homemakers, the nation's nurturers and Chief Executive Officers in our homes, we also should make a conscious effort to never forget the cardinal truth that the future South Africa will inherit is dependent on the actions that we dictate and take, today as women.

As women, we are the anointed specie to safeguard the future of our children, our future leaders and our country as a whole, and we need to guard against men who are hell-bent on jeopardising our collective future. We all know that there are good and bad men and our first responsibility as women of substance is to support each other against all odds and team up with good men to take our country forward.

As we speak here today, we cannot help but admit that in as much as our country has made tremendous strides towards the total enfranchisement of women, there are still hard-to-die misogynistic attitudes that we need to exorcise from the fabric of our society.

On that vein, I call on all of us - as women – to come together, put our shoulders to the wheel and cleanse our society of toxic anti-women sentiments and actions wherever they rear their unsightly head. Let us come together as strong women of integrity and embrace this year's women's month theme that says: "The Year of OR Tambo: Women united in moving South Africa forward." Let us unite for a common cause and pledge to never celebrate the fall of a fellow woman but instead lift each other up, mentor one another and together unshackle the chains of societal bondage that continues holding back some of the gifted amongst us.

As I make a heartfelt plea for us as women to unite and mobilise towards a better life, indulge me as I invoke the timeless words of struggle icon Oliver Reginald Tambo during the occasion of the Conference of Women held in Luanda, Angola in 1981 when he said: "The mobilisation of women is the task, not only of women alone, or men alone, but of all of us, men and women alike, comrades in struggle. The mobilisation of the people into active resistance and struggle for liberation demands the energies of women no less than of men." OR Tambo understood the critical role that an organised women movement plays in charting a new path and injecting a new sense of hope and direction for a nation such as ours.

As women of substance, we must not abdicate our responsibility to groom our boys and girls to be patriotic, educated and caring adults because if we do that we will be throwing away our God-given calling to be the nation's nurturers.

For a moment, ask yourself who gave birth to, fed, kept, guided and nurtured all the great men and women of the world today - the answer will point to a strong proud woman, and that should be reason enough to remind you of the power invested in us by the higher being and society.

Armed with our might, unique feminine qualities and prowess, let us join hands as women, go out there and challenge all forms of patriarchy and gender discrimination wherever we encounter them so that a future South Africa becomes one we will be proud to have helped shape - a gender sensitive, non-sexist and equal society where the gender of an advocate is less important than the views she presents.

As women of our beautiful nation, we have a responsibility to act in an upright fashion and exhibit a high level of integrity so that we earn and demand the respect of our sons and daughters as well as our fellow countrymen.

We need to be activists against sexism and always remain conscious of our responsibility to demand gender parity - mentor, guide, empower and protect our sisters and most importantly girl children. As we do that we shall also be protecting boy children, ensuring that they have strong, educated and resourceful partners with whom to face the future that they will inherit.

I say that with a firm belief that none shall dare challenge me on this fact because our history is richly laced with anecdotes of strong women – heroines of our anti-apartheid struggle- who walked the thorny path for the liberation of our country alongside their male counterparts armed with great wisdom and resourcefulness. I speak of Mama Zondeni Veronica Sobukwe, Mama Winnie Nomzamo Madikizela-Mandela, Mama Adelaide Tambo, Mama Albertina Sisulu, Mama Ruth First and many other luminaries who kept the liberation torch burning on the home front. These were the “unseen stars that shone unseen” and whose efforts to free an African child are often underplayed. These were the true superstars of our liberation and you and I should be fortunate to associate with them.

Encouraged by the selfless actions of the heroines who came before us, I firmly believe that we are well equipped as women in post-1994 South Africa to forge a non-sexist nation where a woman is fairly afforded all the opportunities that her aptitude allows and that no woman is discriminated against solely based on her gender. Those opportunities we shall make our own through unity of effort, feminine resourcefulness and professional excellence.

As I close, please allow me to make a special birthday wish to “Mother of Azania”, the lady that Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe was fortunate to call his wife, Mama Zondeni Veronica Sobukwe who turned 90 last month on July 27. Happy Birthday Mama Sobukwe and a Happy Women’s Month to all.

I thank you.