



Welcome Remarks by H.E Sibongiseni Dlamini-Mntambo

Celebrating South Africa's women's day

30 August 2017

One of the names we South Africans love dropping now and then in our speeches or remarks is that of our struggle icon Nelson Mandela; either giving some brilliant anecdotes or just something meaningless to claim a piece of him in one way or another. So allow me to re-count an incident which he narrated at one of the events I attended where he was a guest speaker.

He starts his address by informing us that just after his release from prison he visited London and went to our Embassy there. He says after several meetings he decided to take a short walk to Trafalgar square and as he was approaching Trafalgar square there was a bit of commotion with some people recognising him. He says not far, there was a young couple who had been minding their business until this commotion.

The lady got excited and was saying to the guy "its him, it's him come lets go meet him". The guy looked confused and was not sure who this "him" person is and why everyone was excited. He says the lady was shocked that the guy did not recognise him and as she was pulling the guy to approach him (Nelson Mandela), he heard her say don't you know him? It's Bishop Desmond Mandela.

Honourable Madam Truedor,

Dean of the diplomatic corps, H.E Florence Chideya,

Assistant Deputy Minister: Sub-Saharan Africa Branch at Global Affairs, Ms Leslie Norton,

Excellencies,

Honourable guests, Colleagues, Ladies,

Good Afternoon and welcome to South Africa's women's day celebration.

To avoid the Trafalgar incident, let not assume that everyone know who am I. My name is Sibongiseni Dlamini-Mntambo, the South African High Commissioner.

Firstly I would like to thank you for taking time out of your schedules to come and celebrate South Africa's women's day with us. It is a gesture that we do not take for granted but a gesture we really appreciate. Being fairly new in Canada I have also learned that this is not the right time of the year to host events as most people take time out to enjoy summer and be with families.

As South Africa's women's month draws to a close let me give you a little bit of background to the Women's day which is celebrated annually on the 9th of November. For those who are familiar with South African history, you will remember that one of the apartheid laws required black /African men to apply and carry a travel 'pass', just for travel within South Africa. The purpose was to maintain segregation and control migrant labour, it was all part of the general apartheid policy of the time.

In the early 1950's the policy was extended to include black/African women. On August 09 in 1956 about 20 000 women of all races gathered and marched to the Union Buildings in Pretoria, South Africa – in protest of the so-called Pass Laws.

The 20 000 women left petitions containing more than 100,000 signatures at Prime Minister J.G. Strijdom's office door. They stood silently outside his door for 30 minutes. The women then sang and chanted a protest song and slogan: Wathint' abafazi Wathint' imbokodo! (Now you have touched the women, you have struck a rock).

While the cruel apartheid system was against black Africans, the women who marched on 09 August 1956 were from all racial groups. Even though there was no logical reason to hope for change then, there was no intention of giving up the fight against the madness, the unjust system of apartheid.

For the African women, the tunnel seemed very long with no end in sight. However, the flicker of light was because amongst others, some people from other races took a stand, the non-African women who joined the march.

The white, Indian and coloured women who marched with the African women to the Union Buildings on this day did not have to. Their status was different, they were privileged. However their gesture was an inspiring display of political strength, female solidarity and inner fortitude.

They knew that it was not about them as individuals but that they were contributing towards something bigger and just. August 9 is both a reminder of the great women who helped mould South Africa and the trailblazing women who continue to lead the country forward.

We may have dismantled the cruel apartheid regime but the struggle for women emancipation, respect, recognition and acknowledgement in the workplace, in society, in communities and globally continues.

Not just for the women in South Africa but for women in the world. Research after research and statistics after statistics has been presented to confirm that women continue to be underrepresented in key economic activities and that leadership roles are still heavily skewed towards men.

Clearly, gender equality is still eluding us. Following the expiry of the Millennium Development Goals, the United Nations recently adopted 17 Sustainable Development Goals, which include SDG 5. SDG 5 relates entirely to the achievement of gender equality. It is preposterous that at this day and age women are tossed crumbs falling off from the main table.

If for instance, we were to look at the status of women in diplomacy based on the research findings by the Embassy magazine (this is a UK magazine which covers issues on diplomacy), in 2012, overall, the proportion of female heads of mission was just over 14 per cent.

Now where am I going with this? Most of us women seating here today are particularly privileged that we are counted in this percentage. We have been presented with an opportunity to - not necessarily change the world but an opportunity to make the change we want to see about women's plight.

We are educated; some from democratic countries; first, second world countries, G20, common wealth; ... you name it. The truth is we have made it; we are in that bracket which is benefitting from the falling crumbs. It may not be a brilliant position to be overly excited about, but it does come with power....the platforms... and the influence.

We are amongst the few or first, and some of us are even referred to as trailblazers... but I wonder if this should inspire us? This is nothing to really write home about, it is

nothing remarkable. Being first women should actually bring feelings of astonishment. We should not be excited to be tossed crumbs but we should demand to be in the main table. Why has it taken millennia for women to reach this point? And how do we ensure that it does not take another millennium before another woman achieves similar success?

Some of the women waiting patiently on the other side of the door are capable, intelligent, qualified and can do the job just as any men or even better. All they need is an opportunity. For some, a chance to acquire the necessary skills, an enabling environment, a door to pen - is all they need.

So, honourable guests, August 09 is a day we recognise those voices, those brave women who sacrificed so much, risked their lives, gave their time, some of whom we may never even know or meet. Some by then, had made their names in life and had nothing to personally gain by fighting for other women.

Given our status and all that is at our disposal, we can choose to close the door and remain comfortable and forget about those women who are still left behind, in that long dark tunnel, caught in the order of a chaotic world, but who still remain hopeful that you and I will bring some light to their tunnel. They are hopeful that we will be brave enough to create disorder so as to make order not only for them but for the benefit of all.

We can choose to play deaf to their silent screams, and desperate knocks; play blind to their sufferings because we have made it. It is after all their problem they are not our problem.

But my plea is that we as individuals or collective if possible think about our next step when we leave this event.

Ladies, as we conclude the formalities let me take this opportunity to thank Madam Truedor for being an inspiration. The work you do towards assisting the less fortunate women and girl children speaks volumes about your attributes.

Thank you also for your brilliant address and sharing this day with the ladies present here today, some of whom have found a temporal home in Canada. The South African High Commission is really honoured and has a deep respect for your humility.

Ms Norton what a brilliant address. It is true each and every individual can make a difference in your sphere of influence. It was really an honour to have you give those thoughtful remarks to our guest today. Thank you for your wise words indeed.

I would like to thank Lorraine Klaasen, one of South Africa's jewels. Her mother Ms Thandi Klaasen, who passed at the beginning of this year (2017), was a jazz musician from Johannesburg with an amazing voice.

This is a woman whose strong resolve saw her beat the odds which were stuck against her. During her life time she received a number of Awards and one of which is the Woman of Distinction Award which she received in [Canada](#) (1999). Lorraine, thank you for keeping her memory alive.

I would like also like to thank each and every one of you here today for celebrating this special day in the history of our country, South Africa – Wathint' abafazi! Wathint' imbokodo!

And to my team, Team SA – Oogxa bam, enkosi ndiyabulela, Ngiyabonga kakhulu, Baie dankie vir al u ondersteuning, hulle moet huis to gaan want die volgende een izoba nzima. Kea leboha