

Speech by KZN Health MEC Neliswa Nkonyeni on the occasion of the women's celebration at Howard College.

Women emancipation – is it fairly practical?

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When the United Democratic Front (UDF) was formed in August 1983, there were three basic tenets of freedom that described the projected character of the society envisioned by the UDF – non-racism, non-sexism and a democratic society. This socio-political configuration expressed in the spirit of the democratic movement was not a pipedream to be wished for and to be kept as a political fantasy of gender equality. It was expressive of the deeper aspirations of the leadership of the nationalist movement – women and men who were in exile, those who were in various prisons and those who sustained the leadership of the UDF. Non-sexism – a social modus vivendi that repudiates sexism in all forms and disguises – has always been a cornerstone precept of the policies of the African National Congress since the advent of the Pretoria March in 1956.

What our women leaders were saying through that march against the Pass Laws is that racist and sexist violation of their human dignity was tantamount to the violation of the Image of God in them and as such, was going to be resisted – (as Malcolm X suggested – by all means necessary.

Non-sexism thus foregrounds – directly or indirectly – the need to be always fully conscious of the historical oppression, discrimination and exclusion of women in all processes that define life in its fullness.

ALIBONGWE IGAMA LAMAKHOSIKAZI!

The topic, which I was given as an entry point to the subject of celebrating Women's Day in 2007 is: "**Women emancipation – is it fairly practical?**" posits the question with a plethora of assumptions and presuppositions. One of those inherent assumptions is that emancipation of women is an island, a process that is organically and strategically divorced from the imperatives of the national democratic revolution.

Another assumption of this topic is its undertone of doubt and skepticism, that projects practicality as an inflexible indicator for women emancipation.

More importantly, the topic presupposes that giant strides made in political representation at all levels of governance have all come to zero. This is a reactionary, intellectualist and gradualist position that does not belong to a revolutionary formation like SASCO.

Who is not aware of the novelty of women Mayors in so many local and District municipalities across the country since 1994?

Who still questions not only the validity but also the legitimacy of the 50–50–equity balance in public representation institutions like the Executive (at all tiers of government), Parliament (national and provincial legislatures) and Judiciary (from most junior of judicial officials to the level of judges of the Constitutional Court?

Who still has doubt of the competency levels of leadership within society in general and within the ANC in particular, even when the odds have been stacked against them? "Women emancipation – is it fairly practical?" is a question that belongs to the era of male domination and prejudices the ontological being of women as women.

Let me say this boldly once and for all: the actions of the people of T section (e17 eMlazi) in the past few weeks will leave a bad taste in our

mouths long after the 2010 World Cup has come and gone. The public stripping of Zandile of her pants; her being paraded naked in the streets of 17 and the subsequent burning of her family homestead is all demonstrative of cultural vigilantism that devalues women to lower than the lowest human low. What those barbaric and retrogressive men did to Zandile was to criminalize her womanhood instead of celebrating her status as a woman; they dehumanized her instead of affirming her humanity; they violated her human rights instead of entrenching her woman rights. They insulted all the women of this country by treating this young woman like sexual commodity, a trophy to be shamefully lifted for its perceived misdemeanor, an absolute non-entity. They must be punished; harshly and be taught a lesson that the emancipation of women from all forms of oppression, discrimination, exclusion and prejudice is **ABSOLUTELY, NON-NEGOTIABLE**.

On the same token, let me quickly hasten to say this that what the men of T-section (e17 eMlazi) did to Zandile is not attributable to all men across the country. There are men out there – real men – who know the value of the choices that a woman makes. They know that an injury to one woman is an injury to all women; and an injury to all women is an injury to the God created women. So I am saying that we cannot paint men with the same brush and project them as reactionary and vigilantist as those men who violated uZandile and thus by inference violated all women who wear pants (privately and publicly). The Commission on Gender Equality; the Court of Equality, and the Courts of Law should speedily recourse Zandile to the extent that justice is seen to have been done because justice delayed is justice denied.

Let me briefly deal with various trajectories of women emancipation in our country.

1. POLITICAL EMANCIPATION

At this level we have seen progress with both Presidents Mandela and Mbeki dealing deliberately and affirmatively with representation of women at all levels of governance and public life. Their respective agendas, which in the main reflect the democratic agenda and ethos of the ANC, have put women right on the topmost pedestal of public space through all tiers of governance. We now have women leadership from Branch Executive Committee level in the community right up to the Deputy President of the Republic of South Africa.

In the interluding space from bottom to top we have Ministers and Deputy Ministers, Premiers of Provinces and Women MECs, Speakers and Deputy Speakers, Chief Whips and their Deputies, Mayors and Deputy Mayors – the list goes on endlessly. But the bottom–line is that at the political level we have achieved commendably. This is by no means exhaustive of the agenda of women reaching the plateau of liberation as understood and defined by them. So, fight on there is still room for improvement even at this level.

2. ECONOMIC EMANCIPATION

This specific strand of struggle for women emancipation has seen women occupy business and financial services on their own accord. Put differently, what the policies crafted by government and other legislative authorities have done is to create an environment that enables women to define their own economic and financial destinies.

Affirmative action policies and legislation have ensured that women take opportunities offered by this environment and utilize them to their advantage – from the street vendor who sells fruit and vegetables in the township, through to someone who is able to interpret a mining or information technology business plan for a women empowerment through Broad–Based Economic Empowerment deal to a National Minister who is putting women first for housing in communities where there is abject poverty.

What I am saying here is that women have had to fight and struggle for themselves to enter the economic emancipation mainstream. This is attested by small and micro enterprises like burial societies (oMasingcwabisane) within churches and stokvels within communities, ama-Co-operatives within various government departments, following through to big international business deals where women have carved their various niches. This progress is one of their own blood and sweat and the perspective of joint partnerships with men is still putting women at a slight disadvantage vis-à-vis the benefits that accrue to their partners.

3. CULTURAL EMANCIPATION

Let me say this without fear of contradiction and /or favor: at the cultural sphere, the emancipation of women is way behind the political and economic realms of liberation.

- man being the head of the family is susceptible to abuse by men
- gender-based violence falsely premised on cultural imperatives (African communities have never used violence to demean women-folk and to put women down as part of their culture base
- women and girl children have been sexually violated by men close to them and old enough to be their protectors and defenders
- disabled and elderly women have not been spared either
- culture has been misplaced and misrepresented

4. ETHICS OF SELF-EMANCIPATION

I need to emphasize the fact that all said and done, women can only lead their pilgrimage and struggle against their oppression and discrimination. In other words, women are their own captains regarding the liberation destiny. Self-emancipation is the way for women to move forward in determining their total liberation.

First step would be to learn to be as assertive as possible at all levels and platforms. No is a no to things we do not agree with. Education is the key to the realization of this component. Follow your dreams!

We also need to take our lives and sexuality very serious and use all the avenues open for us to undergo screening, and preventive cultures. Lastly, those amongst us who are enlightened and empowered should reproduce themselves and lend a hand to those less fortunate.

Masingadonselani phansi.

I wish you a happy women's day.