

Speech by KZN Health MEC Neliswa Nkonyeni on the occasion of the Women in Partnership Against Aids Summit at Ocean Conference Centre in Durban

07 August 2007

We are meeting here again today to look deeply on issues that pertain to the welfare and survival of women of our country.

We are doing this at the most appropriate time knowing that in two days time, on National Women's Day, we will be joining the entire nation in paying tribute to the women of the 1950s who played a pivotal role in our struggle for equality, freedom and peace.

Before we are engulfed and buried in tears and sorrows about the plight of the womenfolk, I want us to recognise and pay tribute to the leadership of this country for placing women development and empowerment issues top on the agenda. We also have to recognise and appreciate that our country is the only one in the whole world that has designated a holiday and the whole month just to address women's issues. I am highlighting this because we have a duty to jealously guard and protect the progress already made and also to ensure that there are no reversals.

Yes, in two days time we will be meeting to recall the heroic and courageous actions that women took on 9 August 1956, and I think it will be an opportune time for all of us to assess the strides and progress that has been made in the quest to realize women emancipation.

We have to agree that many important gains have been made to empower women. A wide range of programmes pay special attention to the needs of women and priority continues to be given to promoting women's access to economic opportunities.

It is unfortunate that whenever we refer to the legacy of the past a lot of people think that we do so because we like whining but the reality is that too many women, particularly black women, still live in poverty and suffer the consequences of underdevelopment and deprivation. Worse, too many women are still victims of violence and abuse.

That violence, abuse and denigration are the reasons why we are today converged to mobilise one another and strengthened Women in Partnership against HIV and AIDS.

Our operational plan, which is in line with the national one, seeks among other things to see to the:

- Improvement of the social and economic status of women
- Elimination of violence against women in conjunction with Men in Partnership against HIV and AIDS.
- Partnerships that ensure the involvement of all sectors including people with disabilities, traditional leaders, faith based organisations, labour and big business.

Fellow participants, I would like this gathering to deliberate and pronounce on some of the things we normally take for granted:

A. On Disabled women

Let us face it, women with disabilities are at much greater risk of domestic violence and abuse than their peers without disabilities. While the risk factors are generally the same as those experienced by all women, they are heightened by the presence of a disability. Like all victims of violence, women with disabilities are often isolated from their families or communities. Let us highlight their plight.

B. On Women trafficking

It is crucial for everyone to understand that it is a fundamental human right to be free of sexual exploitation in all its forms. That women and girls have the right to sexual integrity and autonomy.

The injuries that prostituted and trafficked women suffer are same as those experienced by any other woman: post-traumatic stress disorder, severe depression, damage to reproductive systems, damage from sexual assault and beatings, and sexually transmitted diseases.

What is worse is about women in this category is the isolation of the victims; their dependence on their abusers; their difficulty in accessing criminal justice and social service systems; and their fear of exposure to the authorities. Let us find ways to accommodate them.

Let us also look at ways On How To Help An Abused Woman

- Believe her story
- Listen and give her non-blaming advice

- Let her know that hers is not the only relationship in which violence occurs. At least one out of every five women in this country will experience partner abuse.
- Let her know that she is not to blame or responsible for HIS behaviour. He CHOSE to abuse her
- Let her know that the assault is a crime...the same as if a stranger assaults her, and lastly,
- Help her to realize that domestic violence can harm her children

Fellow compatriots, we need to continue building partnerships with big business; Government alone cannot succeed in the fight against women and child abuse as well as in its efforts to fight against the spread of HIV and AIDS.

Last week Friday, at the Mahatma Gandhi Hospital, we accepted a generous gift of an expanded Thuthuzela Crises Care Centre building, worth R1,2 million from the Sibaya Casino barons. These are facilities that are intended to:

- Restore dignity and ensure justice for victims of sexual violence.
- Help victims of sexual violence to become survivors, and
- Provide care for the youngest victims of rape

We all know that it is never easy for the victims to cope. Most victims as you may understand are abused by people they are close to and as such are imbued with fear, shame and self-loathing.

In order for us to move forward we need to accept that AIDS is not just a health problem. It is a welfare, economic, spiritual, societal, communal, family, and individual problem.

In this regard we are therefore correct when we use this platform as an opportunity to report back and take stock of how far we have come. We are using it as an opportunity to monitor each other's work, to give feedback and evaluate what we have done as well as to plan ahead and identify what further steps need to be taken to advance the position of women in our province.

I for one, as an MEC for Health in this province, I am now reporting on progress on programmes that are targeting our women folk:

First and foremost we have to acknowledge that our Province is the most ravaged in terms of HIV and AIDS, TB and other debilitating diseases.

We have realised that the provision of preventive and curative health care cannot achieve the optimal health status of our people if these are not complemented and supplemented by other interventions, which address the issues of poverty and poor living conditions.

I have to point out that our Provincial Department of Health has adopted the theme: “Investing in Women and Children secures a healthy nation” for 2007/2008 and in this regard it has come up with many innovative projects that target women especially those in the rural areas.

Fellow compatriots, please do understand that we are now unashamedly using broad based black economic empowerment (BBBEE) as one of the key mechanisms we have adopted to address the exclusion of black people from the mainstream economy.

We are inviting the participants of this important gathering to make use of the opportunities available. I have to mention that we have simplified things and that people with no formal learning have been encouraged to use their natural talents and have benefited from this process.

Our Department of Health is now considered the frontrunner with regard to Targeted Enterprise Development in the Province.

For the 2005/06, 147 contracts were awarded to Co-operatives amounting to R11,5 million, of which the majority were awarded to women owned enterprises.

Some of the supplies and services that we have ring fenced for our people are the supply and installation of curtains, supply of pyjamas, uniforms and protective wear, body bags.

We have also made it our policy to engage local communities to be the only ones that render the following services for us: gardening, cleaning services, construction work, minor repairs and maintenance, amongst others. Mind you, here, for the sake of sustainability, we are giving out three-year contracts.

In 2006/07 the Department saw a huge improvement in the awarding to contracts to Co-operatives with an amount of R94 million covering such contracts. The beneficiaries of the majority of these contracts were women.

For the 2007/08 financial year, projects/contracts to the value of R 51, 233, 896.92 have been awarded for a range to supplies and services, to women-owned enterprises. We still have more in the pipeline.

As you deliberate, please come up with a schedule in which you would like us to come to you areas to expatiate more on these opportunities.

Our Department is serious about fighting disease, fighting poverty and giving hope.

Phambili ngamadoda anakekela omama nobantwana!