

**Speech by KZN Health MEC, Ms Neliswa Nkonyeni on the occasion of the celebration of the Women's day event for the Department**

**27 August 2007**

Programme Director

I am really honoured to again have another opportunity to be with you as representatives of all the womenfolk in our Department. I am honoured because today I can personally pass my heartfelt gratitude to all of you for the sterling work you do for both our Department as well as for our people in distress. Thank you again.

As we celebrate the women's victories over the years of struggle, let us remember the bigger struggles that we still face in our quest to Promote health; prevent and manage illnesses with emphasis on poverty, lifestyle, trauma and violence.

Fellow compatriots, yes gains have been made over the years but judging from the march that we had to partake in at Umlazi last week, one realises that all of us still need to be Advocates and Organisers for the rights of women, especially their Reproductive and Sexual Health.

We are still called upon to develop skills and build capacity within and outside of the Department of Health in order to promote policies and programmes that are more responsive to barriers affecting women's and men's ability to lead healthy lives and receive and benefit from health care services;

I am saying 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 misdemeanour, 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**.

To all those men who have not yet seen the light, we are saying, it is no error of judgement that we have entrusted the health needs of our population to the capable hands of women.

Deliberately, we have chosen to have **80%** of our District Managers as women and **46%** serving as Hospital Managers, all this because by their very nature, women are compassionate and understanding. In the remaining time as the MEC of this Department, I will continue to strive for more improvements in this regard as I have full confidence in women leadership in the realisation of our core values that calls for:

- Open communication, transparency and consultation
- Commitment to performance, as well as,
- Courage to learn, change and innovate

We need to continue mobilising all the resources as well as our men folk to continue supporting gender equality in order to give women and men equal opportunities.

We are calling and fighting for all psychological and physical barriers to be removed so as to eventually arrive at the point where we can say yes we have:

- Equal opportunities
- Equal access to resources and rewards
- Equal power to influence decisions that are made within our society.

We will only attain that if we consciously undertake to develop tools that promote and expand health sector policies, interventions and programmes at the district and local levels that systematically address gender concerns, including gender-based violence.

We need to use our offices of influence to increase knowledge and evidence on how sexual differences and gender inequalities impact upon specific health problems, health services and successful responses.

I am excited that we have made this day a reality as in this current financial year we have pledged to concentrate the bulk of our

programmes and services on the most vulnerable under the theme that says *INVESTING IN WOMEN AND CHILDREN TO SECURES A HEALTHY NATION*

As women in South Africa, we are truly blessed because in our struggle for total emancipation we are supported by pieces of legislation that have been enacted to ease our plight.

Fellow compatriots, **Chapter two of the Constitution of South Africa** provides for an equality clause irrespective of race, creed or gender.

We are saying, thanks to the courage borne with the March to the Union Building 50 years ago that today we can stand up and say:

**WATHINTA ABAFAZI WATHINTA IMBOKODO, UZOKUFA.**

Today those pronouncements are no longer slogans; ask those who violate the **Domestic Violence Act**, the **Child Maintenance Act** and the men who rape, as they now qualify for the minimum sentence.

Also, in full appreciation of the health risks posed by termination of pregnancies in illegal circumstances, usually as a result of difficult different forms of violation, our progressive government has enacted the **Choice on Termination of Pregnancy Act**.

Let us continue to be there for those who are abused; raped and unappreciated.

That violence, abuse and denigration should be the reason why we should all support and strengthen organs like the Women in Partnership against HIV and AIDS.

These are structures that among other things seek to see to the:

- Improvement of the social and economic status of women
- Elimination of violence against women, this being done 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.

As women, we ought to support one another so as to have strength to fearlessly confront societal prejudices against us.

When we cannot cope, let us know that the provision of an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) is a practical way of demonstrating that the Department has a sincere interest in the well being of its employees. The programme is available to all employees who are in any location, throughout all levels of our organisation, it caters for members who have personal problems that affect or are likely to affect them and thus impact on their output.

We are saying, please make use of this assistance with the knowledge that self-referral or referral through a manager will not affect your job security, promotion, or any other privilege.

Keep in mind that all employee information given to EAP Services is treated confidentially;

Let us help one another to reduce the stress levels.

As mothers, grannies, aunts, daughters and sisters, take note that the Department relies solely on you on the special focus that it has put on integrated programmes to reduce the mortality of women, children and other vulnerable groups from communicable and non-communicable illnesses.

KwaZulu-Natal has a higher proportion of females than males at 53.2% and 46% respectively. Most of the females and children reside in rural areas. Our trust is on you for the call to strengthen Primary Health Care and provide caring, responsive and quality health services at all levels.

As we leave this hall for our allocated workstations, let us go knowing that the Department values the vital contribution that all of you make.

Side by side we will continue and triumph in our commitment to fight disease, fight poverty and giving hope.