



**DEPUTY MINISTER IN THE PRESIDENCY FOR WOMEN, YOUTH
AND PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES**

REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY

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AT THE

WOMEN OWNED BUSINESS EMPOWERMENT SERIES

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Programme Director,
Leaders of business and government,
Esteemed entrepreneurs,
Representatives of civil society, academia and the private sector,
Distinguished guests,

It is an honour to address this Women Owned Business Empowerment Series at a time when our nation is called to unlock its full economic potential.

This gathering is not merely another conference but a platform where we confront some of the deepest structural barriers facing women in South Africa and the wider African continent.

It is also a space to reaffirm that women's economic empowerment is not just a matter of development or growth, but a matter of justice, dignity, and human rights.

We must begin by naming the reality before us with honesty and clarity.

Despite the progress of our democracy, women continue to carry the heaviest burdens of poverty, unemployment, and inequality.

Statistics South Africa tells us that women are more likely to live in households with inadequate income, less likely to own assets, and more likely to shoulder the unpaid care work that sustains our communities.

Even when the economy falters, women fall first and hardest. The problem statement is not just about economics, it is about power. The power to participate in decisions, the power to control resources, and the power to shape the future of our nation.

To situate this conversation within our broader policy framework, we must recall that the ANC 2024 Manifesto, the Medium-Term Development Plan, the National Development Plan 2030, and international instruments such as the Beijing Platform for Action, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Sustainable Development Goals, and the African Union's Agenda 2063 all converge on a single imperative: the full and equal inclusion of women in every sphere of society.

Women's economic empowerment is not peripheral, it is central to national progress. It is the key to breaking cycles of intergenerational poverty, reducing gender-based violence, and building an economy that works for all.

Let us be clear: an economy that excludes women is an economy operating at half strength. It is an economy that undermines its own potential and condemns itself to slower growth and deeper inequality.

A McKinsey report has shown that closing the gender gap in labour force participation and entrepreneurship could add billions to South Africa's GDP. Imagine the transformation if every woman had equal access to finance, markets, technology, and networks.

The evidence is unequivocal: women reinvest their income in their families, their communities, and their societies. Empowering women economically creates a multiplier effect that benefits the entire nation.

But we cannot stop at broad arguments. We must look at concrete examples of how women-owned enterprises are already changing lives.

One such example is the Lindiwe Sanitary Pads story of the first woman-owned sanitary products SMME. This cooperative, started by a young woman who saw the struggles of young girls missing school due to lack of access to sanitary products, has grown into an enterprise that manufactures affordable sanitary pads. With support in the form of training, seed funding, and access to local procurement channels, Lindiwe has built a sustainable business that not only creates jobs, but restores dignity to girls and young women in their community.

This is not charity, it is empowerment. It is what happens when women are given the opportunity to translate their vision into reality.

Across our country, other inspiring stories abound.

Right here in KwaZulu-Natal, a group of women entrepreneurs established a cooperative producing essential oils from indigenous plants. With the support of government's Small Enterprise Finance Agency and mentorship from local universities, these women are exporting to international markets.

In the Eastern Cape, women in rural villages are leading agricultural cooperatives that feed schools and clinics, showing that food security and

women's empowerment go hand in hand. These are not isolated miracles; they are signals of what is possible if we deliberately dismantle the barriers holding women back.

We must also confront the persistent structural barriers that keep women from scaling their businesses.

Access to finance remains one of the greatest obstacles. Women are less likely to have collateral, less likely to be considered “credit-worthy” by traditional banks, and more likely to face discrimination in the allocation of capital. Our government has responded with targeted interventions such as the R3.2 billion Women Empowerment Fund, managed by the Industrial Development Corporation, and procurement reforms that direct at least 40% of public sector procurement spend to women-owned businesses.

But let us be honest to acknowledge that implementation gaps remain, and bureaucracy can frustrate the very entrepreneurs it seeks to support. Our task is to ensure that policy commitments translate into real opportunities on the ground.

Beyond finance, we must address access to markets. Too often, women's businesses are confined to the informal sector, unable to grow beyond micro-enterprise level because they cannot access supply chains.

This is why initiatives like the Women's Economic Assembly are so critical. By bringing together government, business, and civil society, the Assembly has committed to opening value chains in mining, agriculture, automotive, retail, and ICT sectors to women-owned enterprises. These

commitments must now be tracked and enforced. Empowerment is not an act of goodwill, it is our collective responsibility.

Another crucial frontier is digital inclusion. The Fourth Industrial Revolution is reshaping how we live and work, but the digital divide threatens to leave women behind. In South Africa, women are less likely to have access to smartphones, data, or digital literacy training. Yet, digital platforms are increasingly where businesses are born, where trade is conducted, and where opportunities are found, particularly with the rise of e-commerce as a disruptive force on how business is conducted.

Programmes such as SA Connect, the Smart Africa Youth Chapter, and the Department of Communications and Digital Technologies' initiatives to expand broadband access must prioritise women, particularly in rural and township areas. When women are digitally connected, they are economically connected.

Programme Director, as we expand our solutions, we must also recognise the intersectional nature of women's empowerment. Young women face higher unemployment rates than men. Women with disabilities encounter double discrimination in accessing opportunities. Rural women must contend with geographic isolation and poor infrastructure. Migrant women face legal and social barriers to inclusion.

An effective empowerment strategy cannot treat women as a monolith, it must be tailored, intersectional, and responsive to the lived realities of diverse women.

Let me also emphasise the link between economic empowerment and the struggle against gender-based violence and femicide (GBVF). Economic dependence is one of the factors that traps women in abusive relationships. The National Strategic Plan on GBVF calls for economic empowerment as a pillar of prevention. We must ensure that every effort to fight GBVF is linked to creating pathways for women to earn, own, and thrive. Economic justice is not separate from social justice, it is part of the same struggle.

The ideological lens of the ANC obliges us to frame empowerment not as charity, nor as trickle-down benevolence, but as structural transformation. We stand for an economy where redistribution, equity, and justice are central principles. This means deliberately restructuring value chains, redistributing resources, and creating policies that affirm the rights of women as economic citizens. It means moving from a narrow growth model to an inclusive development model.

At the heart of this effort is partnership. Government cannot do it alone. The private sector must commit not just to corporate social responsibility projects, but to transforming their procurement practices, leadership pipelines, and investment strategies. Civil society must continue to hold us accountable and ensure that the voices of grassroots women are heard in decision-making spaces. Academia must produce the research and data that guide evidence-based interventions. And most importantly, women themselves must lead, innovate, and claim their rightful place at the centre of our economy.

We should also draw lessons from international best practice. In Canada, gender-responsive budgeting ensures that every government expenditure

is analysed for its impact on women and men. In Sweden, implementation of ILO Convention 190 has placed workplace safety and the fight against harassment at the core of economic policy. Across Africa, Rwanda has demonstrated how legislated quotas and targeted support for women entrepreneurs can drive inclusive growth, with women holding over 60% of parliamentary seats and driving key sectors of the economy.

These are not distant examples, they are models that we can adapt and build upon.

Programme Director, as we celebrate the courage of women entrepreneurs, let us not ignore the difficult reality that many are operating in fragile contexts. Load shedding, inflation, the rising cost of fuel, and climate change disproportionately affect women-owned businesses, particularly in agriculture and manufacturing. Our resilience strategies must therefore include gender-responsive climate action, green energy investments that include women, and disaster recovery funds that protect women-owned enterprises.

The question before us today is not whether women can lead, innovate, or succeed. The question is whether society will remove the barriers that prevent them from doing so at scale.

Will we choose to build an economy where half the population is systematically excluded, or will we choose to build one where every person has the opportunity to contribute and thrive?

This is the moral question, the political question, and the economic question of our time.

I therefore issue a call to action.

To government departments: ensure that procurement targets are not only set but met, and that women-owned businesses are paid on time.

To financial institutions: design products that recognise the realities of women entrepreneurs and provide credit without unnecessary collateral demands.

To the private sector: open your supply chains, mentor women-led start-ups, and integrate empowerment into your core business model.

To civil society: continue to organise, advocate, and mobilise.

To our communities: support the women entrepreneurs in your midst, buy local, and invest in one another.

And to women themselves: never underestimate your power. Claim your space, raise your voices, and refuse to be confined to the margins.

Programme Director, the story of women's economic empowerment is the unfinished chapter of our liberation struggle. Political freedom was won in 1994, but economic freedom remains elusive for millions of women.

To echo the words of the Freedom Charter: "***The people shall share in the country's wealth.***" This means women shall share equally in the country's wealth. It means women shall no longer be relegated to the

peripheries of the economy, but shall be leaders in building industries, creating jobs, and shaping the future.

Let me end with the words of former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, who said: “***Achieving gender equality requires the engagement of women and men, girls and boys. It is everyone’s responsibility.***”

Indeed, empowerment is not a women’s issue, it is a societal imperative. When women rise, we all rise. When women thrive, nations prosper. When women are empowered, freedom becomes real.

Let us leave this gathering with a renewed commitment to action. Let us move beyond rhetoric to results, beyond promises to partnerships, beyond intention to impact. The time for incremental change is over. The time for bold transformation is now.

I thank you.