



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

REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

DRAFT REMARKS

BY

MS MMAPASEKA STEVE LETSIKE, MP

AT THE

2026 INTERNATIONAL DAY OF THE BOY CHILD

***“Breaking the Silence: Boys, Positive Masculinity and Mental
Health.”***

ON

22 MAY 2026 | JOHANNESBURG | 10:00



women, youth &
persons with disabilities
Department:
Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



[CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY]

Programme Director, Mr Samora Mangesi;
Deputy Minister of Basic Education, Dr Reginah Mhaule;
Deputy Minister of Social Development, Mr Mogamat Ganief Ebrahim
Hendricks;
Deputy Minister in The Presidency, Mr Seiso Mohai,
Gauteng MEC for Education and Sport, Arts, Culture and Recreation, Mr
Lebogang Maile;
Acting Director-General of Basic Education, Dr Granville Whittle;
Managing Executive for Sustainability at Premier FMCG, Mr Julian
Singonzo;
Assistant Director-General for Education at UNESCO, Ms Stefania
Giannini;
Headmaster of Jeppe High School for Boys, Mr Brendan Gittins;
Representatives of UNESCO, DBE, Primestars, DBSA, AHF, Heartlines,
Sonke Gender Justice, the Baithudi Mampane Foundation, YouthStart
Foundation, GIZ, Premier FMCG and all partners present;
Educators, parents, civil society leaders, artists, sports personalities, and
most importantly, the learners gathered here today,

Good morning.

I am deeply honoured to join you for this important commemoration of the
International Day of the Boy Child, held under the theme, ***“Breaking the
Silence: Boys, Positive Masculinity and Mental Health.”*** This theme is
not decorative language. It is a political, social and moral instruction to a
country that can no longer afford to pretend that silence is harmless.

We are gathered here because silence has consequences.

Silence turns pain into anger; loneliness into violence; and fear into performance. Silence teaches children to hide wounds until those wounds begin to speak through behaviour, withdrawal, addiction, cruelty or despair. A society that tells boys not to cry must not be surprised when some of those boys grow into men who cannot name their pain except through rage.

Today, we must be honest enough to say that the boy child question is not a side issue that is a distraction from gender justice or a retreat from the struggle for women and girls. It is part of the same struggle. Patriarchy does not only place women and girls in danger, it also manufactures boys into versions of manhood that are emotionally starved, socially violent and spiritually wounded.

This is why the Department of Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities welcomes this commemoration.

Our constitutional mandate is to advance socio-economic transformation, empowerment and participation of women, youth and persons with disabilities through mainstreaming, advocacy, monitoring and evaluation. The Department's vision is a transformed, inclusive society free from all forms of discrimination and capable of self-actualisation. That vision cannot be realised if we do not confront the conditions that shape boys before they become men.

Boys and young men are too often treated only as agents of change in gender equality work, rather than beneficiaries of care, protection, healing

and development. The limited data on boys' specific vulnerabilities weakens effective programming and that rigid masculinity norms cause measurable harm, including emotional suppression, resentment, depression, behavioural disorders, violence, disengagement from education and risky behaviour.

This is the crisis we must confront without fear.

Across sub-Saharan Africa, more than 50% of boys experience physical abuse during childhood. Even before boys are fully exposed to many of these social pressures, evidence from early learning already shows that boys are behind girls in school readiness and foundational skills. This means the struggle begins earlier than we often admit.

It begins before the matric results, before the first disciplinary hearing, and before the first act of violence. It begins in the early years, in the home, in the classroom, in the playground, in the community and in the stories society tells children about who they are allowed to become.

We must also place this discussion within the wider condition of young people in South Africa. Statistics South Africa's first quarter 2026 labour force data reminds us that the crisis facing young people is not simply unemployment in the narrow sense, but a wider crisis of exclusion from economic participation.

In that quarter, 4.7 million young people aged 15 to 34 were unemployed, and a further 10.6 million were outside the labour force altogether. This means that millions of young people are not only struggling to find work; many are also disconnected from the labour market itself, standing

outside the formal pathways through which dignity, income, skills and opportunity are usually accessed.

These are not neutral numbers. They describe millions of young people standing at the edge of adulthood without secure pathways into dignity, work, belonging and purpose.

Programme Director, when we speak about the boy child, therefore, we are not only speaking about emotions. We are speaking about the political economy of despair. We are speaking about what happens when a young person is told to be strong in a society that gives him no work, no counselling, no safe recreational space, no adult mentorship, no reliable pathway into the economy and no language for his inner life.

Mental health must be treated with the same seriousness.

UNICEF South Africa reported that 60% of children and young people who responded to its U-Report poll felt they needed mental health support over the previous year, with the need remaining particularly high among 15 to 24-year-olds.

The South African Health Review has also estimated that 17% of South Africa's children have a diagnosable and treatable mental disorder, yet only one in ten are able to access care.

Globally, the World Health Organization states that one in seven adolescents aged 10 to 19 experiences a mental disorder, and that suicide is among the leading causes of death for young people.

These numbers demand a different level of urgency.

They tell us that mental health is not a private inconvenience. It is a development, education, violence prevention issue, and a youth empowerment issue. It is a constitutional issue because dignity cannot be separated from psychological well-being.

We must also be clear that boys are not only potential perpetrators of violence. Many are victims of violence, neglect, abuse and exploitation.

Statistics South Africa's reporting on crimes against children shows deeply troubling trends, including increases in rape and sexual assault cases involving children over the period analysed. This reality requires us to reject simplistic narratives. A boy can be wounded and still be accountable. A boy can be vulnerable and still need guidance. A boy can be a victim of violence and still require firm socialisation into non-violence. The state must be sophisticated enough to hold all these truths at once.

That is why the work being done through ***What About the Boys? 2*** matters.

The programme for today places the film, the status of boys report, panel discussions, learner voices and intergenerational dialogue at the centre of the commemoration. This is important because policy cannot only speak from above. It must also listen from below.

Policy must hear the schoolboy in the township, the rural learner, the child with a disability, the boy who is bullied, the learner battling depression, the young person living with HIV, the child whose father is absent, and the

boy who is desperate to become someone but does not know where to begin.

However, we must not romanticise dialogue.

Dialogue is not enough if it does not lead to systems. A boy can be inspired in the morning and return in the afternoon to a home where violence is normal. He can attend a beautiful event and return to a school without psychosocial support. He can hear us speak about positive masculinity and still live in a community where gangs provide the only visible model of male power. Therefore, this commemoration must be a launchpad, not a performance.

From the side of government, our responsibility is to move this work into the machinery of the state.

Through the Department's Annual Performance Plan, we are strengthening mainstreaming, advocacy, monitoring and coordination for women, youth and persons with disabilities. This includes work on youth social vulnerability interventions, capacity building for youth focal points, monitoring the implementation of the National Youth Policy, strengthening the National Plan of Action on youth development priorities, advancing economic participation interventions, and ensuring that youth development is not scattered across government without accountability.

This matters for the boy child because the vulnerability of boys cannot be solved by one department alone. It requires Basic Education to create safer and more supportive schools. It requires Health to strengthen child and adolescent mental health services. It requires Social Development to

support families, parenting programmes and child protection systems. It requires Police and Justice to protect children from violence and respond with dignity. It requires municipalities to provide safe recreational spaces, libraries, sports facilities and community programmes. It requires the whole state to understand that prevention is not a soft issue. Prevention is the hardest work of transformation.

The National Youth Development Agency also forms part of this broader response. Its 2026/27 Annual Performance Plan places emphasis on youth entrepreneurship, employment opportunities, second-chance education and training pathways, National Youth Service, civic participation and social contribution. The NYDA APP further identifies the need to expand young people engaged in paid service opportunities from 40,000 to 100,000 across South Africa, while supporting youth-owned enterprises, rural enterprises, township enterprises and enterprises owned by young people with disabilities.

This is not separate from today's conversation. A boy who has opportunity is less vulnerable to destructive forms of masculinity. A boy who can access training, service, mentorship, entrepreneurship support and work experience begins to see himself as a builder of society, not as a prisoner of circumstance. Economic inclusion is therefore also violence prevention. Skills development is also mental health support. Youth service is also character formation. Entrepreneurship support is also dignity in practice.

We must also recognise the Department's work on gender-based violence and femicide as part of this agenda. The implementation of the National Strategic Plan on GBVF requires prevention, social norm change,

community mobilisation and accountability across government. Boys and men must be part of prevention work, but not as mascots for campaigns.

Boys must be engaged honestly in schools, sports clubs, faith communities, initiation spaces, families, digital platforms and local government structures. They must be challenged to reject misogyny, homophobia, ableism and violence. They must also be supported to heal from the violence they have inherited and sometimes internalised.

Positive masculinity must therefore be understood correctly. It is not public relations for men, a polite adjustment to patriarchy and it is not the language of “good men” used to avoid accountability.

Positive masculinity is a rupture. It is a deliberate break with the old architecture of domination. It says manhood must no longer be measured by control, conquest, emotional hardness or the ability to frighten others. It must be measured by responsibility, discipline, care, equality, courage, honesty and service.

A democratic South Africa cannot raise boys to believe that women exist to be controlled. It cannot raise boys to believe that queer people exist to be mocked. It cannot raise boys to believe that persons with disabilities are lesser human beings. It cannot raise boys to believe that violence is a language of respect. It cannot raise boys to confuse fear with authority. That kind of masculinity belongs to the graveyard of history. Our task is to bury it with discipline and build something better in its place.

Our Constitution is not neutral on this matter. It demands a society founded on dignity, equality and freedom. It calls us to create the conditions in which all persons in their diversity can become fully human.

This vision is not alien to our constitutional tradition. Our Constitution is itself an intersectional document, born at the meeting point of race, gender, class, geography and culture. It promises not only formal equality but substantive equality that takes account of context, history and the deep wounds of apartheid and patriarchy. Intersectional justice is simply the living application of that constitutional promise.

For this reason, we must understand that there is no single boy child experience. The boy child in a well-resourced urban school does not face the same reality as the boy in a rural school without adequate infrastructure. A boy with a disability faces barriers that others may never see. A boy from a poor household carries the weight of hunger and uncertainty into the classroom. A boy who is queer or questioning may face ridicule before he has even found the words to understand himself. A boy affected by HIV, substance abuse, violence or family breakdown may arrive at school already exhausted by life.

If our interventions are blind to these intersections, they will fail.

This is why the expansion of this commemoration beyond one physical venue is important. I am encouraged that the 2026 commemoration seeks to host 350 participants in person and reach more than 800 online, with efforts to create provincial viewing rooms so that boys beyond Gauteng can participate in the live-streamed programme. That is the correct direction. A national crisis requires national reach. The boy in

Johannesburg is not more deserving of attention than the boy in Limpopo, Northern Cape, Eastern Cape, Mpumalanga, Free State, North West, KwaZulu-Natal or the Western Cape.

But the next step must be deeper. We need school-based boys' dialogues that are sustained beyond commemorative days. We need psychosocial referral pathways that are known to learners and educators. We need teacher development on gender, mental health, bullying, disability inclusion and trauma-informed support. We need peer education models that help boys speak to one another differently. We need fathers, uncles, coaches, artists, pastors, imams, traditional leaders and community activists to stop outsourcing the formation of boys to the streets and the internet.

We also need data as we cannot govern by assumption. We need better sex-disaggregated and age-disaggregated data on boys' school readiness, attendance, dropout, bullying, mental health, exposure to violence, substance abuse, disability, access to support services and participation in youth development programmes. The state must be able to see the boy child clearly if it is to serve him effectively.

To the boys present here today, I want to say this once and clearly: your life matters, but your life must also become a life that honours the dignity of others.

You are allowed to feel. You are allowed to ask for help. You are allowed to be confused while you are growing. You are allowed to fail and begin again. But you are not allowed to use your pain as a weapon against girls, women, children, persons with disabilities, queer people or anyone who is

different from you. The future needs your courage, but it must be courage disciplined by kindness, equality and responsibility.

To the partners present here, we appreciate your contribution. UNESCO, DBE, Primestars, DBSA, AHF, Heartlines, Sonke Gender Justice, GIZ, YouthStart Foundation, the Baithudi Mampane Foundation, Agape Youth Movement, Premier FMCG and others have helped build a platform that speaks to one of the most urgent social questions of our time. But the partnership must now become infrastructure. It must become programmes, evidence, training, monitoring, referrals, community mobilisation and measurable change.

After today, we must be able to answer difficult questions. How many schools will continue these dialogues? How many boys will be referred for support? How many educators will be capacitated? How will provincial viewing rooms become provincial action networks? How will learner voices shape policy?

The state must never fear these questions. A developmental state must welcome accountability because accountability is how commitments become delivery.

As I close, I want to locate this day within the broader struggle for a humane South Africa. We are not here to create a hierarchy of children's pain. We are here to build a society in which the girl child is safe, the boy child is whole, the child with a disability is included, the queer child belongs, and every young person can grow under the protection of a Constitution that sees them as fully human.

The International Day of the Boy Child must therefore be remembered not as a ceremonial pause, but as a call to action.

Let it mark the moment when we refused to abandon boys to silence.

Let it mark the moment when we declared that wounded boys must not be allowed to become wounded men who wound others.

Let it mark the moment when government, schools, families, civil society and communities agreed that the struggle for gender equality must also transform the making of men.

Let us build boys who can love without possession.

Lead without domination.

Disagree without cruelty.

Feel without shame.

Serve without arrogance.

And carry power without violence.

Because when we heal the boy child, we do not only save one child. We interrupt a cycle. We strengthen a family. We protect a community. We deepen democracy. We move closer to the South Africa promised by our Constitution.

Together, let us break the silence.

Together, let us build positive masculinity.

Together, let us ensure that every boy grows into a man whose strength is measured not by whom he can overpower, but by what he can build, protect and transform.

I thank you.