



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

REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

STATEMENT BY

MS MMAPASEKA STEVE LETSIKE, MP

FOR THE

**2026/27 BUDGET VOTE DEBATE
BUDGE VOTE 20: WOMEN, YOUTH AND PERSONS WITH
DISABILITIES**

ON

13 MAY 2026 | PARLIAMENT, CAPE TOWN | 10:00

Honourable Speaker / Deputy Speaker / Chairperson,
Honourable Members,
Fellow South Africans in your diversity,

I stand to support Budget Vote 20 not merely as a statement of departmental expenditure, but to account for how we are progressively moving the promise of the Constitution from paper into practice for every South African across all areas of human endeavour.

The Minister has laid out the policy direction and legislative programme that will guide this budget vote. My task today is not to restate that vision, but to journey with you into its deeper terrain — into the spaces where policy meets lived experience, where budgets become tools of belonging, and where the promise of our Constitution is either realised or deferred.

Thirty years ago, South Africans chose a Constitution that is not only a legal charter, but a living document of hope born at the intersection of race, gender, class, geography and culture. Our Constitution promises that the equality that was hard won by the African National Congress and other progressive partners would be felt both in law and in life.

Potso e e nnang e le fa pele ga rona ke gore a tsholofetso eo e fitlhetse batho ba ba sa sireletsegang ba ba e tlhokang thata.¹

¹ The question that is ever before us is whether that promise has reached the vulnerable who need it most.

Honourable House Chair, South Africa's disability rights architecture is robust. We have ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and domesticated it through the White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. A Disability Rights Bill is under consolidation by the South African Law Reform Commission, with a commitment to table it before the end of this administration. Yet, more than 3.3 million South Africans — about 7.5% of our population — are persons with disabilities, while only 1–1.4% of the workforce is made up of persons with disabilities, and representation in top management hovers around 1%.

These numbers show us that inclusion remains aspirational rather than operational, and that exclusion is even more severe at the intersections of disability, race, youth, gender, geography and sexual orientation.

In the current financial year, we are accelerating the implementation of the 3% national employment target for persons with disabilities, alongside the 7% public service target by 2030, treating these not as compliance indicators but as instruments of economic inclusion.

We will be broadening economic participation through:

1. Scaling opportunities in public service employment, private sector inclusion and entrepreneurship;
2. Promoting inclusive procurement policies to open market access;
3. Strengthening skills development and workplace readiness programmes, particularly for post-school youth with disabilities; and
4. Expanding Supported Employment Enterprises, while encouraging public and private sector procurement to sustain these initiatives.

Agbare voorsitter, Insluiting moet verder strek as deelname aan die ekonomie tot deelname aan besluitneming.²

For the first time, a Representation Framework is being developed to systematically review appointments to state-owned entity boards and strategic positions processed through Cabinet so that women, youth, persons with disabilities, LGBTI persons and other vulnerable groups are intentionally and measurably represented at the table.

We are building a society that lives by the principle **“Nothing about us without us”**. That is why we are institutionalising structured engagement with organisations of persons with disabilities, co-designing policies with them, and expanding a national programme of advocacy, awareness and social transformation.

We are mainstreaming disability across government by leading the establishment of a Disability Nerve Centre of Excellence to address fragmented data and accountability challenges because without data there can be no planning, without planning no implementation, and without implementation inclusion remains a promise deferred.

Modulasetulo wa Ntlo e e tlotlegang³, as disability inclusion exposes the limits of implementation, we are correct to assert inclusive reproductive justice reveals the depth of inequality that shapes the lives of young people — particularly young women and gender-diverse people.

2 *Inclusion must extend beyond participation in the economy to participation in decision-making.*

3 *Honourable House Chair*

Under-age and adolescent pregnancy sits at the heart of development. It determines whether a young person remains in school or is pushed out or whether she enters the economy with agency or constraint. It shapes the lived realities of girls, whose access to affirming, non-discriminatory healthcare remains uneven.

We cannot be complacent while over 130,000 girls give birth every year in South Africa, with pregnancies recorded among girls as young as ten. This is a manifestation of poverty, gender inequality, gender-based violence and systemic failures in protection and prevention. For girls with disabilities, these risks are intensified. What this moment demands is not a fragmented response but a systemic one.

In the coming year we will:

1. Develop a multi-sectoral national strategy to prevent and respond to under-age and adolescent pregnancy, anchored in a whole-of-society approach that brings together education, health, justice, social development and community leadership to drive measurable reductions in adolescent pregnancy.
2. Initiate a process to harmonise laws governing children's reproductive rights, addressing inconsistencies in age of consent legislation and access to sexual and reproductive health services — including contraception and termination of pregnancy — while tackling the ongoing scourge of child marriage.
3. Deepen community engagement through the Deputy Minister's under-age pregnancy roadshows, undertaken with the University of Pretoria's Obstetrics and Gynaecology College and Steve Biko

Academic Hospital as led by the amazing Prof Zozo Nene, to bridge the gap between policy and lived reality.

4. Strengthen national awareness and prevention campaigns on statutory rape, working with communication platforms and community structures to reinforce reporting obligations, improve case detection, and ensure justice, and we will;
5. Reinforce school-based and community programmes, partnering with school governing bodies, traditional leaders and faith-based institutions to deliver comprehensive sexuality education and reshape harmful social norms.

The good news is that we are starting to see a decline. Hence, we are adamant that inclusive reproductive justice cannot be delivered in clinics alone. It is built in homes, schools and communities. As Audre Lorde reminds us, there is no such thing as a single-issue struggle, because we do not live single-issue lives. The fight for reproductive justice is inseparable from the fights against gender-based violence, poverty and discrimination.

We must therefore move from reacting to crises to transforming the conditions that produce them.

Honourable Members, for policy to become a lived reality, accountability must be the bridge that connects the two. Our Constitution did not establish institutions like the Commission for Gender Equality (CGE) to observe inequality from a distance; it established them as independent Chapter 9 bodies to confront inequality directly.

The CGE receives its budget through our departmental appropriation, but it operates independently to monitor, investigate, educate and intervene where rights are undermined. Accountability must be visible, measurable and enforceable.

In the year ahead, the CGE will:

1. Support the development and review of at least 22 legislative and policy submissions to close gaps in the legal framework and advance transformation;
2. Intensify strategic engagements with public and private sectors to influence practices and drive gender transformation;
3. Reinforce accountability through investigative and complaints mechanisms, finalising hundreds of complaints and undertaking provincial investigations into systemic gender inequality;
4. Expand public education and awareness programmes, delivering over 100 communication initiatives, 80 gender mainstreaming programmes and 80 community outreach engagements; and
5. Provide Gender and Development training across both public and private sectors, while strengthening research and monitoring functions to track compliance with regional and international instruments.

These interventions, alongside those by the Department, are steadily moving accountability beyond reporting into enforcement, education and transformation.

Our interventions are already bearing fruit with 85% of national departments now reporting on the National Strategic Plan on

Gender-Based Violence and Femicide (NSP-GBVF), up from just 26% at inception.

These commitments are increasingly embedded within district-level planning frameworks, ensuring that accountability is not only national in scope but local in impact. Justice must not only be declared at national level, it must be experienced where people live — in communities, workplaces, churches, *ezindumbeni* and our homes.

Honourable House Chair, inequality is not only social; it is deeply economic. A quiet but persistent form of exclusion operates within our economy, denying access to capital, markets and opportunity. Women, youth, persons with disabilities and LGBTI entrepreneurs remain the most affected.

To speak of empowerment here is to speak about access to power.

This is why our approach to economic inclusion is shifting from compliance and activity toward outcomes-based implementation — measuring real change in young people's lives.

The National Youth Development Agency (NYDA) has embraced this shift by moving beyond counting beneficiaries to understanding whether enterprises survive, incomes are sustained, and young people transition into stable economic participation. Our theory of change links research, evidence, investment, programmes and measurable outcomes.

Key interventions by the NYDA this year include:

1. Strengthening entrepreneurship pipelines, not only through funding but through aftercare, mentorship, market linkage and enterprise sustainability support;
2. Mobilising private sector investment, development finance and public sector collaboration to unlock capital at scale;
3. Expanding the NYDA's physical and digital footprint, leveraging 43 branches, mobile outreach, municipal partnerships and a modernised digital platform so that rural and underserved youth can access services;
4. Leveraging the state's procurement power to open market pathways for historically excluded entrepreneurs; and
5. Positioning young people in high-absorption sectors such as agriculture, the oceans economy, digital industries and the green economy.

This outcomes-based approach is underpinned by evidence: more than 4.8 million young South Africans are unemployed, and nearly half are not in employment, education or training.

*Ngeke sivumele lesimo sokusweleka kwemisebenzi sibuse embusweni wentando yeningi othembisa ukulingana nesithunzi kubo bonke abantu.*⁴

Malungu ahloniphekileyo⁵, in a few days on 17 May, the world will mark the International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia, Transphobia and Intersexphobia (IDAHOBIT). For South Africa, this day must remind us that our Constitution was the first in the world to prohibit discrimination on

⁴ We cannot allow the status quo to reign in a democracy that promises equality and dignity to all.

⁵ Honourable Members



the basis of sexual orientation, and that this promise must be lived in across the Republic.

I remind us of this international day because we are living through a dangerous political moment, where a rising anti-gender, anti-democracy and anti-human rights movement is the battleground for equality.

Across the world, and here at home, these forces organise under the language of “family values”, “protecting children”, “faith” and “tradition”, but what they often seek is the rollback of hard-won freedoms — the control of women’s bodies, the erasure of LGBTI persons, the silencing of civil society, and the weakening of democratic institutions that exist to protect the vulnerable.

This backlash is organised, well-funded and strategic in its approach. It uses misinformation, fear and moral panic to turn communities against the very rights that our Constitution protects. It tells women to know their place, queer people to disappear, young people not to question power, and persons with disabilities to remain grateful for partial inclusion.

Our response must therefore be equally deliberate: we must strengthen constitutional literacy, deepen civic participation, protect democratic spaces, and ensure that young people are equipped to recognise and resist hatred disguised as morality.

This is why our youth and technology interventions must be rooted in a rights-based agenda. Through the Presidential Youth Employment Initiative, digital skills development, innovation support and the revitalised National Youth Service, we are not only connecting young

people to opportunity; we are building a generation rooted in service, critical thinking, solidarity and democratic values. Technology must serve liberation, not hatred. It must expand democracy, not weaken it.

Fellow South Africans, as I prepare to take leave of the platform, I land guided by the ethos of our Constitution.

Thirty years on, our Constitution calls us to remember that freedom must be for all, or it is not freedom at all. It instructs us to honour the invisible activists — the young woman in a rural village who refuses to surrender her future to so called “*blessers*”, the unemployed young person who still rises each morning to search for opportunity, the person with a disability who demands access in a world not yet designed for them, and the trans person who demands care in an unwelcoming clinic — because their courage sustains our democracy..

Our work today is to ensure that the next 30 years of our democracy are defined not only by what we have built, but by whom we have included. Let us carry forward this work with urgency and with pride — knowing that what we do in this House today will shape the lives of those whose voices still struggle to be heard.

Albeit the limited resources allocated in the fiscus to this important work, I join Minister Chikunga to table both our budget and bold intent to ensure that as we reflect on the 30 years of our Constitution, equality is a lived experience for all in our diversity, and no one in our Republic is left behind.

I thank you.