



MINISTRY IN THE PRESIDENCY

**FOR WOMEN, YOUTH AND PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA**

OPENING KEYNOTE ADDRESS

BY

**HON. SINDISIWE CHIKUNGA, MP
MINISTER IN THE PRESIDENCY
FOR WOMEN, YOUTH AND PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES**

**WOMANPRENEUR PITCH & MATCH 2026
JOHANNESBURG STOCK EXCHANGE, SANDTON
Date: 4 SEPTEMBER 2026**

SALUTATION

- **Programme Director, Mr Hugo Ribatika;**
- **Dr Reabetswe Kgoroadira, Chief Executive Officer of Sigma Startup Academy;**
- **Dr Nomonde Mabuya-Moloele, Chairperson of the Woman Entrepreneurship Trust;**
- **Ms Samantha Skyring, Founder and Chief Executive Officer of Oryx Desert Salt;**

- Ms Carol Keshy, Chief Executive Officer of the Small Business Institute;
- Senior officials from all three spheres of government;
- Leadership of the Johannesburg Stock Exchange;
- Representatives of the Department of Small Business Development, and of the Department of Trade, Industry and Competition;
- Leadership of the Small Enterprise Development and Finance Agency, the National Empowerment Fund, the Industrial Development Corporation and other Development Finance Institutions;
- Representatives of Huawei, Alternative Capital Group, Pareto, ZS Uniforms and all our ecosystem partners;
- Captains of industry, financiers, investors and venture capital networks;
- Distinguished judges;
- The Womanpreneur Alumni Class of 2025 and the Top 10 Finalists of 2026;
- Women entrepreneurs, innovators and business leaders;
- Members of the media;
- Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

Good afternoon.

Programme Director,

We gather today at a powerful, pivotal intersection of history, possibility and economic transformation. Allow me to extend my

sincere **appreciation to Sigma Startup Academy, under the leadership of Dr Reabetswe Kgoroadira, the Woman Entrepreneurship Trust,** and all our partners, financiers, corporates and sponsors for the invitation to join you.

I am **honoured to be part of Womanpreneur Pitch & Match 2026,** a platform that has evolved from a competition into a genuine instrument of economic transformation, connecting women entrepreneurs to capital, markets, investors and supply chains. I commend Sigma Startup Academy for building an ecosystem that actively connects women entrepreneurs to the resources they need to grow.

I thank the Johannesburg Stock Exchange for hosting us in one of South Africa's most iconic centres of investment and capital formation. Everyone gathered here today represents the ingenuity and entrepreneurial spirit our country needs to achieve inclusive economic growth.

We meet during a season of profound national reflection, the 70th anniversary of the 1956 Women's March, the 72nd anniversary of the Women's Charter, fifty years since the 1976 Youth Uprisings, and thirty years of our Constitution.

Every generation has been called to advance the frontiers of freedom, equality and justice. The women of 1956 marched for dignity. The youth of 1976 rose for opportunity. Our Constitution enshrines dignity, equality and non-sexism as the foundation of our democracy.

Today, **our task is to translate those victories into economic inclusion.** It is fitting, then, that we gather in this institution of investment and capital formation to confront one of the most important unfinished tasks of our democracy, the economic empowerment of women.

Imagine a South Africa where every woman with a viable business **idea** has access to the capital, markets, networks and opportunity she needs to succeed. Imagine a South Africa, where innovation is not limited by gender, and opportunity is not determined by who one knows. Imagine a South Africa where women entrepreneurs are regarded, as owners of productive assets, owners of land, builders of industries, creators of jobs and drivers of innovation.

That is the South Africa envisioned by **the women of 1956, demanded by the youth of 1976, and promised by our Constitution.** It is the meaning of our theme for this 70th anniversary, “**Empowered Women Empower Nations,**” our **baton for the next seventy years.**

For generations, women fought for the right to participate fully in societies. Today we gather at the Johannesburg Stock Exchange, a space that symbolises participation in the economy itself.

There can be no more fitting venue for a conversation about women’s entrepreneurship, investment, ownership and economic inclusion. **To all the entrepreneurs gathered here, particularly**

the Womanpreneur Alumni Class of 2025 and the Top 10 Finalists of 2026. I thank you for your courage and resilience. We are here because of your resolve to stand for women's economic emancipation.

The Women's Charter of 1954 declared: **"We women do not form a society separate from men. There is only one society, and it is made up of both women and men."** It further proclaimed the right of women to **"full equality of opportunity in all spheres."** Those women understood that political freedom without economic freedom remains incomplete.

Today that struggle continues, in boardrooms, in investment committees, in procurement systems and in ownership patterns.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The progress we have made is not accidental. It is the result of decades of struggle by women in government, academia, business and civil society who understood that economic justice requires legislative and policy intervention. Our Constitution enshrines equality and dignity as foundational values and requires the state to redress past discrimination. Building on that foundation, South Africa has developed a series of transformative instruments.

Preferential procurement policy now requires that at least 40 percent of public procurement opportunities benefit women-owned and other designated enterprises. Broad-Based Black Economic

Empowerment incentivises companies to support women-owned enterprises through supplier and enterprise development.

The Public Procurement Act, signed into law in July 2024, is now being operationalised through draft regulations that will make these commitments enforceable, and not aspirational.

Government has already trained close to 6,000 women-owned businesses to bid for and win state contracts, and departments are required to monitor and report on women's participation in every procurement process.

Government has also invested directly. In **May this year, the Department of Small Business Development and SEDFA launched Imbali For Her, a R897 million, three-year blended finance programme offering up to R5 million per applicant, with grants of 40 percent for able-bodied women and 50 percent for women with disabilities.**

It will support close to 975 women-owned businesses and sustain some 2,250 jobs, with a first focus on the Northern Cape, Eastern Cape and Free State. SEDFA has already disbursed R454 million to women-owned businesses in a single quarter and has reached almost half a million women beneficiaries over the past three years.

The dtic's Transformation Fund is a R100 billion instrument, anchored in the B-BBEE Act, explicitly targeting women, youth and persons with disabilities. Its Integrated Financing

Group, working with the IDC and the National Empowerment Fund, has approved funding to more than 590 enterprises worth R26 billion, of which R4 billion has gone directly to SMMEs, women and youth-owned businesses.

The IDC alone has earmarked approximately R9 billion for women-led businesses, and both the Public Investment Corporation and the National Empowerment Fund have committed to dedicated special-purpose vehicles for women-owned enterprises.

These are not small numbers. But commitments and approvals are not disbursements, and disbursements are not yet jobs. I am asking every institution represented here today, SEDFA, the NEF, the IDC, the DTIC, the PIC and our private-sector partners **within the next twelve months, to convert what you have committed into signed term sheets with businesses like the ones that are going to pitch here today.**

The Department of Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities has been championing the institutionalisation of Gender Responsive Planning, Budgeting, Monitoring, Evaluation and Auditing across government, to ensure that departments not only develop policies that support women but allocate the budgets that turn commitments into measurable outcomes.

Through our monitoring work, we continue to find that while many venture capital and **development finance initiatives are commendable in principle, their design often creates barriers**

that prevent the very women they are intended to support from accessing funding. The reality is that access remains out of reach for many women entrepreneurs.

Let me illustrate this with a practical example.

In Greytown, a determined woman entrepreneur worked tirelessly to establish a restaurant that is now operating successfully and contributing to the local economy. When she sought funding to expand her business and create more jobs, she approached one of our Development Finance Institutions. She was informed that her application could not be approved because her financial records were not managed by a Chartered Accountant.

This raises a critical question: **how can we expect a small business owner, whose profits may not even cover the salary of a Chartered Accountant, to meet such requirements before she is given the opportunity to grow?** We cannot continue to judge emerging enterprises by the standards of large, established companies and then claim surprise when women-owned businesses struggle to access finance.

These are **precisely the barriers that our monitoring processes continue to identify.** When such obstacles are brought to light, **Development Finance Institutions themselves must become part of the solution.** They must **design innovative and enabling mechanisms that facilitate entry, build capacity, and support entrepreneurs to become investment-ready,** rather than excluding them at the first hurdle.

As things currently stand, many funding and venture capital schemes exist on paper, yet remain inaccessible to a significant number of women entrepreneurs and aspiring business owners. If we are serious about women's economic empowerment, then access to finance must move beyond availability and become a genuine opportunity. The measure of success is not how much funding is allocated, but how many women are actually able to access it, grow their businesses, and participate meaningfully in our economy.

Alongside this, our policy architecture increasingly recognises that financial exclusion remains one of the greatest barriers to women's entrepreneurship, and government, our development finance institutions and the private sector are being encouraged to expand gender-responsive financial products, blended finance models and investment instruments designed for women-owned enterprises.

Women entrepreneurs are not peripheral to our development agenda; they are central to it. Every successful woman-owned enterprise contributes to job creation, industrial development, innovation and inclusive growth. Women's economic empowerment is therefore not only a matter of social justice; it is a growth and development strategy.

The reality, however, is that we have not yet translated this extensive policy and legislative architecture into the scale of economic empowerment required to achieve real justice for women.

Programme Director,

The global evidence is clear. Women-owned businesses remain a small share of formal SMEs in emerging economies and continue to face disproportionate barriers to finance and growth.

The World Bank estimates that women-owned enterprises account for roughly one-third of the global SME financing gap, and that closing gender gaps in employment and entrepreneurship could raise global GDP by as much as 20 percent.

The International Monetary Fund has shown that excluding women from full economic participation imposes real and measurable costs on national economies. No nation can achieve its full economic potential while underutilising half of its talent.

The women who drafted the Women's Charter demanded equality before the law. The women who shaped our democracy secured equality in our Constitution. Our task now is to secure equality in the economy, in procurement, in ownership, in investment and in opportunity.

Transformation cannot remain in policy documents. It must be visible in balance sheets, supply chains and ownership patterns across our economy.

As Chair of the G20 Empowerment of Women Working Group, South Africa prioritised women's financial inclusion, the care economy, and eliminating gender-based violence and femicide. Financial inclusion must never be reduced to the opening of bank accounts. It is about enabling women to own productive assets, to own land, to secure investment capital and to convert opportunity into sustainable growth.

Distinguished Guests,

Allow me to speak directly to the private sector and the captains of industry gathered here at the Johannesburg Stock Exchange. The future of women's economic empowerment will not be determined by government policy alone. It will be determined in procurement committees, investment committees, boardrooms and capital markets with women being present as decision makers.

Women-owned businesses continue to receive a disproportionately small share of total procurement expenditure, despite the trillions spent each year by governments and corporations. This is not because women lack capability, innovation or ambition. It is because too many systems still fail to open the doors through which women-owned enterprises can enter, compete, grow and lead.

Let every corporate leader in this room ask, **what percentage of our procurement spend reaches women-owned businesses and what percentage should it reach?** Let every financial

institution ask **how many women-owned businesses, it has financed this year.** Let every boardroom ask **whether it is truly building an inclusive economy or merely talking about one.**

I call on corporate South Africa to join government and our development finance institutions in forging a new **Women's Economic Empowerment Compact**, built on five commitments.

First, increase procurement spend directed to women-owned businesses, and measure those outcomes publicly.

Second, ensure women-owned enterprises are meaningfully included in supplier databases and strategic sourcing programmes.

Third, strengthen supplier development through mentorship, compliance support and technology transfer.

Fourth, provide innovative financing and patient capital that enable women-owned enterprises to scale.

Fifth, support women not only as suppliers, but as manufacturers, exporters and industrialists.

The true measure of **today's success will be by our actions.** To our development finance institutions, the dtic, the IDC, the NEF, SEDFA and the PIC, **my request is let disbursements happen within twelve months, against a named pipeline that includes today's Top 10 finalists and the 2025 alumni who have already proven they can execute.**

Congratulations to all our finalists. Your dedication, hard work and excellence have brought you this far, we wish you the very best.

In a few moments, one entrepreneur will be announced as the winner of Womanpreneur Pitch & Match 2026. I will not pre-empt the judges. But I want the Class of 2026 **to hear this from the Minister responsible for the women of this country**. Nine of you will not receive that prize this afternoon. **All ten of you are already employing South Africans. That is a standing no panel can confer and no panel can withdraw.**

The success of this platform will **not ultimately be measured by who holds the trophy at two o'clock, this afternoon**. It will be measured by how many of these businesses have more customers, more capital, more contracts and more employees when we return to this room next year. **And behind every one of those employees is a household with more options than it had before.**

As I conclude, I extend our sincere appreciation to the organisers for their commitment to making this platform possible. **Empowered women do not only empower nations**, but they also build industries, create jobs, grow economies and change the future.

The women of 2026 demand economic power. Our collective responsibility is to ensure that access to finance, markets, capital and opportunity no longer block their way.

I thank you.