



Nomkhitha Gysman

Women's gains must not be frittered away

At last, South Africa's cabinet has actual gender parity. Half of President Cyril Ramaphosa's engine of government now consists of women.

This really is a breath of fresh air – not just for South Africa, but across the region.

One hopes that this will spur on the additional six SADC countries due to hold elections this year.

That means in South Africa, specifically the governing party's 50% gender parity and participation by 2030, is not lip service. It is stipulated by articles 12 and 13 of the Revised SADC Protocol on Gender and Development, of which SA is a signatory.

While praising this great achievement we should be mindful that holistically, SA has failed to achieve 50% gender parity in parliament.

That remains a big concern as the country is left with only two elections before the 2030 deadline. The nation has to take action. I leave that to the ANC Women's League to see how they can jump on the bandwagon. Of course for good reason, ensuring that the ANC policy conference adopts legislation on gender quotas, which will force all SA political parties

to adopt gender parity in their political lists.

Ramaphosa's cabinet is indeed an achievement, and not only for its gender parity.

The portfolios given to women are not just the usual ones that are seen as addressing women's practical gender needs and which tend to entrench division of labour by gender.

In the new cabinet women are leading some strategic ministries, most notably the ministry of state security and the ministry of defence & military veterans.

Other ministries now headed by women are human settlement water & sanitation; public works & infrastructure, forestry, environment and fisheries; and land reform & rural development.

The fact that it is women who now occupy some of SA's key strategic and resource-allocation positions represents a significant shift from the past.

This is noteworthy, not only in terms of the perspective that women are likely to bring to these roles, but also for the perceptual shift that a gender-balanced cabinet will undoubtedly bring about.

While the portfolio of co-operative governance &

traditional affairs may not be seen as quite such a prestigious appointment as defence or state Security, the appointment of the highly experienced Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma to lead this ministry is a welcome decision from the perspective of gender equality and women advancement.

Dlamini-Zuma's commitment to gender issues has been a feature of her leadership in all the positions she has occupied.

Under her leadership (1999-2009) the department of foreign affairs became the first and only department to have a head of gender at chief-directorate level, and as chair of the African Union Commission (2012-2017) the AU gender directorate was within her office. Clearly Dlamini-Zuma brings the necessary clout to juggle the competing interests that her department represents.

At the level of local government, it is crucial that the leadership is both firm and far-sighted enough to ensure that the interests, specifically practical gender needs of the most marginalised members of society – namely poor, illiterate, semiliterate and rural women – are strongly represented.

Dlamini-Zuma's long-term

experience in other ministries as well – health (1994-1999), home affairs (2009-2012) and recently as minister in the presidency – means that she brings to the portfolio an exceptional understanding of how the levers of governance operate.

This is likely to help in the immense task of improving the delivery of basic services to poor women.

If anyone has the capacity to hold together this mixed-bag portfolio and at the same time make sure that the interests of the most vulnerable are foregrounded it is Dlamini-Zuma.

However, my big concern in the restructuring of ministries is the killing of the ministry of women in the presidency. The existence of this ministry was a major gain for women of SA despite the fact that it remained poorly resourced and unable to

What I expected from the president was a strategy that would develop the ministry of women

deliver on its mandate.

In the new dispensation the ministry of women has disappeared and instead there is a combined ministry in the presidency for women, youth and persons with disabilities.

The interests of women do not necessarily coincide with those of persons with disabilities, who need specific types of care and consideration, or with those of youth, who are in a developmental stage and still need guidance.

What I expected from the president was a strategy that would develop the ministry of women and allocate resources to it in the same way that resources have been allocated to other ministries.

Alternatively, I had hoped that the erstwhile 'office on the status of women in the presidency' would be revisited.

That office did a lot of strategic work in terms of researching and documenting status of women across the country and had representatives in each department national and provincially, 'gender focal points' legislation, and notably the Sexual Offences Act emanated from some of their research projects.

It also set up the now defunct SA gender machinery.

Its counterpart at parliamentary level was the joint monitoring committee on the quality of life and status of women; this meant that gender was taken care of at both executive and legislative level.

Mr President, sir, is it not time to reflect on what has worked best to address gender inequalities and women's subordination in the country?

Some of the people who were in the forefront of setting up these institutional arrangements are still around, working somewhere.

It is common knowledge that the president takes gender issues seriously, as attested to in many of his speeches and through the national summit on gender-based violence he convened in 2018.

Despite the welcome positioning of women in strategic cabinet portfolios there remains a distinct danger that, in the collapsing of the ministry of women, gender issues will be subsumed and not receive adequate consideration.

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