

Speech by Deputy Minister Ntopile Kganyago during the Seminar addressing Grade 11 & 12 Physically Disabled Learners organised by Letaba-Helene Franz Bursary Scheme.

Venue: Limpopo, Polokwane

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Chairperson of the Scheme, Dr Silas Morokolo Sathekge

Officials of the scheme

Officials from institutions of higher learning

Government officials

Ladies and gentlemen

I feel honoured to be asked to be here today to address this great gathering which is aimed at encouraging young and beautiful people like you and very important members of our society.

Being asked to deliver the speech could not have come at a suitable time like this in the calendar of this country when we all observe women's month and barely a couple days after

the maiden celebration of the National Construction Week that was championed by my Department.

The struggle of women for liberation and quality is well documented and their efforts were critical in building homes, families and communities while taking care of crucial needs of children. This is one outstanding characteristic of women's struggle to build stable communities. Children as part of those communities are the main beneficiaries, hence our focus to target youth, especially girl children with skills development as part of our National Construction Week which ended on 3 August this year. Of course there'll be another campaign next year and every year after that.

This country was transformed by the endurance and resilience of its own people – men and women, people of all colour, race and creed, youth and the disabled. It was these men and women on whose shoulders we stand as a proud nation, that respect all rights that are enshrined in our enviable constitution – that of women, children, disabled, youth and our aged. Those that violate such rights must be dealt with by laws laid down by the people.

The example such as the groundbreaking march of women in 9 August 1956, Sharpsville massacre of 1960, 1976 June

16 uprisings have all propelled this country from relative obscurity, yoke of apartheid and all forms of oppressions to the one that is symbolic and exemplary in the world.

Our history has taught us that we need to be considerate to people with disability and include them in the main frame of the country's business because when we fought for freedom and democracy – we fought along with them.

The Apartheid legislation contributed to the social exclusion of people with disabilities. First, legislation failed to protect the rights of people with disabilities and, second, through legislation, barriers were created to prevent people with disabilities from accessing equal opportunities.

Although there has, since 1994, been some attempt to identify and eliminate discriminatory legislation from our statute books, many aspects of past discriminatory legislation remain. In addition, some new laws and amendments contain sections which directly or indirectly lead to discrimination against people with disabilities. As a result, large sections of the legislative framework in South Africa still fail to meet international human rights standards and principles with regard to the rights of people with disabilities.

Research estimates that between 5 and 12% of South Africans are moderately to severely disabled. An estimated 99% of disabled people are excluded from employment on the open labour market. Despite this large percentage of disabled people, few services and opportunities exist for people with disabilities to participate equally in society. We must start seeing, disabled people as capable individuals who are contributing immensely to the development of society.

The extremely high levels of unemployment amongst people with disabilities can be attributed to a number of factors:

- low skills levels due to inadequate education;
- discriminatory attitudes and practices by employers;
- past discriminatory and ineffective labour legislation;
- lack of enabling mechanisms to promote employment opportunities;
- inaccessible public transport;
- inaccessible and unsupportive work environments;
- inadequate and inaccessible provision for vocational rehabilitation and training;
- generally high levels of unemployment;

- the fact that menial labour is often the only option for poorly skilled job-seekers;
- inadequate access to information, and
- Ignorance in society.

South African society is still very patriarchal and discriminatory. Although attitudes are changing, women are still typically viewed as second class citizens, subservient to men and in need of protection. Their social role is, by and large, defined through motherhood and homemaking. Women with Disabilities, particularly Black Disabled Women suffer even more, despite their acknowledged role in helping to build the future of this country.

The National Construction Week was one of the attempts of government's initiative aimed at not only celebrating the marvel of construction, but to attract youth to this field. Similarly, the same message was also directed at the youth with disability to find careers in the construction related fields. The Department held more than 100 events nationwide that involved learners of various schools throughout all the nine provinces in where they were given first hand account of the workings of the construction

industry while others had practical experiences in matters related to construction.

The Department of Public Works is central to Public infrastructure development and as a result works closely with the construction industry. Between 2000 and 2004 the department recruited 400 youths mainly from Limpopo, KwaZulu-Natal and Eastern Cape to be trained in basic construction work. The aim was to let them work in Public Works projects to construct some public buildings and make them accessible to people with disability. More than 260 public buildings such as schools, magistrate courts, clinics and police stations were filled with ramps and ballis trades. This programme, known as Youth working towards improving accessibility, was a joint effort between DPW and National Youth Commission and the Office of the Status of the Disabled in the Presidency.

I must state that learners like you who are aspiring to reach the pinnacles of levels of education are born at the right time. Opportunities have been availed to all children and may not be discriminated against on the grounds of their biological conditions.

Barely, two months ago we celebrated 30 year Anniversary of June 16. That brings me to the challenge I pose to you, irrespective of your physical condition, to emulate the class of students that brought about the changes that you as young people enjoy today. As Disabled learners, you can revolutionize the environment and lay foundation of other future disabled people to look at you tomorrow as the bearers of hope and symbol of change.

Once again, as this is the women's month and 50 years since the historic march of 1956, I urge you, especially the young beautiful girls, to also follow in the foot prints of those fearless warrior women, who marched on the grounds of the Union Buildings in Pretoria, armed with 100 000 anti-pass petitions – the likes of *Lillian Ngoyi, Ray Alexander, Frances Baard, Fatima Meer, Helen Joseph, Sofie De-Bryan, Hilda Watts, Bettie du Toit*, Rahima Moosa and many others – as they did, so can you in a modern day democracy.

The vision of the Integrated National Disability Strategy proposed by the White Paper stipulates that there must be an integration of disability issues in all government development strategies, planning and programmes. There must be an integrated and co-ordinated management

system for planning, implementation and monitoring at all spheres of government.

These include prevention, health care, rehabilitation, public education, barrier free access, transport, communications, data collection and research, education, employment, human resource development, social welfare and community development, social security, housing and sport and recreation.

The establishment of the Office on the Status of Disabled Persons, in the office of the Presidency was a testament to the dictate of the White Paper. We must all pledge our support and accede to the call of government to express our unwavering commitment to the upliftment and improvement of the conditions of those members of our society who are disabled by playing an active role in working with them to find joy and happiness and the fulfillment of their aspirations.

As citizens, your rights are guaranteed in our beloved constitution. Government efforts such as Batho Pele Principles recognizes your right to access government services, opportunities and buildings without any undue hindrance.

I would like to echo the words of Minister of Public Works Ms Thoko Didiza when we concluded the celebration of the focus week, “Let us take these young people on learnerships, provide them with bursaries to study further, but most importantly, employ them in line with the slogan for this year’s campaign, of helping them **“build their dreams.”** In that spirit, I would like congratulate institutions such as Letaba-Helene Franz Bursary Scheme for their efforts in assisting these learners.

I thank you.