

THE MINISTER OF PUBLIC WORKS, Ms GWEN MAHLANGU-NKABINDE, MP,
DELIVERS A KEYNOTE ADDRESS AT THE GALA DINNER HOSTED BY HER
DEPARTMENT IN HONOUR OF THE DELEGATES ATTENDING THE 35TH
CONGRESS OF THE INTERNATIONAL ALLIANCE OF WOMEN

DATE: Tuesday 23 November 2010

VENUE: Birchwood Conference Centre, Ekurhuleni, Gauteng

TIME: 18H00

- The Deputy Prime Minister of the Republic of Zimbabwe, Thokozani Kupe
- The Deputy Minister of Public Works, Hendrietta Bogopane-Zulu
- Various Ministers, Deputy Ministers and MEC's present tonight
- The Director-General of the Department, Mr. Siviwe Dongwana
- All senior officials
- The Chief Executive Officers of the Public Entities reporting to the Minister of Public Works, their Board Members and senior staff
- The President and the Vice President of the International Alliance of Women, Rosy Weiss, and Lyda Versteegen, respectively
- The Secretary – General, Lene Pind
- The Regional Vice President and the Host of the Congress, Ms Mmabatho Ramagoshi
- Conveners and organizers of the Congress
- Ladies and Gentlemen of the media
- Distinguished Guests

Good evening.

It is only fitting that we should play host to the Women of the World at the time when we as Africans are still basking in the after-glow of the successful FIFA 2010 Soccer World Cup we had hosted between June and July this year.

We have recently also hosted the Confederation of African Football Associations tournament for the women championships, again showcasing the multi-talent of women as professional athletes in a sport traditionally perceived as the male enclave.

Our excitement as the Department emanates from the fact that we had a central role to play ahead of the World Cup kick-off in assisting with the supply chain management issues, which were aimed at helping the host cities to procure complex and mega infrastructure projects, smoothly. This we achieved.

I am not gloating when I remind the house tonight that the stadium which hosted the opening and the closing matches of the games was actually built on the land owned by the Department of Public Works. A year before the start of the tournament, my Department, in its role as the landlord of the state had bequeathed the property to the hosting City of Johannesburg.

Today the Soccer City stadium stands not only as part of the legacy of our impeccable organization as a country but also as a testimony to the maturity and professionalism of our construction industry.

The mandate of the Department of Public Works is to provide the physical accommodation space to government and its departments and this we do among others by procuring infrastructure through the construction industry. Historically my Department has played a significant role in the growth and development of both the construction and property industries in the country even during the dark days of apartheid when the economic planning was carefully designed to exclude the black people and the women.

The patriarchal organisation of our society was taken for granted and this became one of the lasting legacies of apartheid until the ANC-led government acceded to power in 1994 and the transformative agenda began to be observed in earnestness. Many initiatives were spawned as a result of government policies which confronted the skewed economic patterns of our society and questioned the acquiescence of our industries in the face of such glaring inequalities exacerbated by institutionalized racism and gender discrimination.

It came as no surprise when one of the studies commissioned by the Gender Commission in 1998/99 concluded that next to mining, “the construction industry was probably the least likely to empower the women”. This was a clarion call which said unless we deliberately intervene, the struggle for democracy, equality and freedom would be meaningless to all the women who were toiling in this industry.

In its reaction, the Department under my predecessor the late Minister Stella Sigcau whom I have the highest regard for, embarked on a brave campaign to mobilize for the emergence of black, small and women contractors to benefit from the frenzy roll out of the multi-billion rand infrastructure programme at the time when the Reconstruction and Development Programme, a policy cornerstone of the ANC-led government, was laying a foundation for the building of a new society characterized by democracy, prosperity for all and equal opportunities irrespective of gender.

First in its multi-pronged strategy was the need by the Department to consolidate the women voices in the industry. Strategic alliances were then entered into among others with the lobby groups such as the South African Women in Construction (SAWIC). Next the Department rattled its procurement regime and reached yet another milestone with the launch of the Strategic Empowerment Initiative for the Women in Construction in 2001.

Under the initiative, the Department intently set aside certain projects for execution by women and the women-owned enterprises. With the instant

capitalization of R188 million, about 128 infrastructure projects were identified nationally within the Department to be undertaken solely by women contractors or women led joint ventures. At first the scheme went well and the Department celebrated milestone after a milestone as women delivered some impeccable projects including the successful undertaking of the Repair and Maintenance projects. Along the way we came to face certain challenges, some of which were of our own making as women.

We felt that our good intentions came to be later undermined by the rigid procurement legislation which unfortunately had to grapple with a fine balance between economic austerity on one hand and transformation expediency on the other. Admittedly the Preferential Public Procurement Framework Act (PPPFA) has been cited and singled out by many would-be beneficiaries at most forums as the most single piece of legislation that has effectively slowed down the pace of transformation particularly in both the construction and built environment industries.

I know because even recently when I attended which the Think Tank Forum convened by the Council for the Built Environment (CBE) about two weeks ago, many stakeholders during the commissions still expressed dissatisfaction at what was perceived to be the reverse gear of the transformation agenda. I am aware that in other similar forums the same piece of legislation has come up for criticism. As government we can, and we do review our initiatives if they become counter-productive. But we remain speechless and dumbfounded when women consciously begin to collude with others to undermine the story of their own development.

We remain concern when we experience the evil practice of fronting where noble government efforts are undermined by women who allow themselves to be duped by male contractors. Many a-times these women would tender for, and successfully win lucrative government contracts on the basis that theirs were enterprises headed by women. Down the line we would be disappointed to learn that these women were nothing but mere fronts who knowingly and consciously participated in an attempt to dis-empower themselves. This is unfortunately the unpalatable truth. We have tried to stamp out the practice by bringing in government law enforcers but we are disappointed by appears as the slow pace with which they act.

Therefore it was experiences such as these and more which led the Department to proactively embark on a comprehensive study to familiarise itself with the challenges that women were faced with in making inroads in this environment. This is how the idea of the Colloquium of Women in Construction Project came to be born. Sub-titled "***unearthing the challenges that daily confront the women in the construction industry***", the study became our mere attempt to fathom the reality beneath some of the bizarre accounts related by these women in relation to their working and professional environment.

Many women for instance related stories of constant harassment at the construction sites by their male colleagues. From derogatory verbal remarks to instances of explicit sexual harassment, women were rarely seen as colleagues and/or counter-parts but more as wandering souls who by the grace of God had found themselves thrust in the midst of a male-dominated industry for the men to ogle at.

Often little or no provision was made particularly on the construction sites to accommodate the female needs as most sites would lack amenities suited for the female construction workers. This scenario is not only limited to the factory floor but would also play itself out in the few boardrooms where women have modicum representation. The old boys network syndrome remains in place albeit in subtle fashion and this frustrate not only the voices but the creativity of women professionals.

If we continue to turn a blind eye to these blatant acts of institutionalized sexism then we run the risk of encouraging this feeling of impunity. Therefore more education is called for to create both awareness and a platform to balk at any acts of sexism no matter how innocuous they may seem. At the same time, our internal policies which frown upon sexist tendencies as well as the labour relations legislation need to be applied strictly albeit to set an example and dissuade repeat behaviour.

All these negative experiences however, have not taken away the focus from many of the resilient women contractors and other professionals who have soldiered on despite apparent pitfalls. At our initial Colloquium encounter in January 2010, we were encouraged by voices of successful women contractors, women professionals and other lobby groups who adamantly declared that the industry was their chosen destination and collectively would collaborate to teach each other, affirm others and empower all.

Already we are celebrating on daily basis successful results of women who not only undertake major infrastructure projects of government but are doing a sterling job while at it. In the Department we have communicated in the past the triumphs of women enterprises who have delivered on time, on budget and on specification mega projects awarded to them. We have seen the women appointed to head the boards and councils of our professional councils, endowed with the power to shape policies which will breed more of the same sterner stuff.

In turn, we have witnessed the growing chorus of approvals for the work well done as women contractors and other professionals continue to garner awards in recognition of quality (and quantity) for the best projects. To avoid the repeat of the ephemeral successes of the early 2000s, there is an imperative to invest in the development and growth of these gems. Therefore the set asides in the form of the Contractor Incubator Programmes for women, youth, blacks and emerging contractors will need to be vigorously encouraged and actively supported.

More investment needs to be made in developing the business acumen of most women so as to gear them for serious business management. Our resolve should be to produce without flinching, a dozen or more millionaires in as short a time as possible and I want to believe that the government in general and the infrastructure departments in particular have what it takes to realise this vision.

Once we have identified our pebbles, our dedicated women entrepreneurs, we need to ensure a constant financing stream to enable them to take –off with minimum delays. Therefore solid financing options should be considered including the possibility of establishing sector specific banks in the mould of the construction banks of China and Malaysia. These banks, backed by government funding, will single-mindedly target specific sections with an explicit purpose to build them as compared your ordinary high street bank which is risk-averse and would reluctantly invest in the development and success of struggling entrepreneurs without considering its profit motive.

To build a continuous feeder stream, the industry and government should focus more on the supply side to the industry. My Department since early 2000s has been mounting public awareness campaigns in the form of the National Construction Week Marketing Campaign and the 2014 Youth Foundation Social Investment Campaign, to raise awareness among the school going children that the construction and built environment industries are the career destinations of choice. These efforts can be married to other campaigns led by the private sector such as the ***Take a Girl Child to Work*** to target and groom women.

Unless we take these efforts seriously, we shall continue to play second fiddle to other professions such as accounting where the professionals timeously jump in to harvest for young minds. Our industries will get left behind. We have started in the Department to offer bursaries to the boys and girls committed to follow the construction-related studies at the tertiary level. This year we have more than 100 bursars who have qualified and are looking up to the Department to take in as interns and young professionals where they are assisted to qualify and register as professionals. This bodes well for skills generation, succession planning and job creation.

I want to take this opportunity to welcome the international delegates of the International Alliance of Women to our country and wish them well in their deliberations. We have placed in your midst the preliminary report on the experiences of South African women in construction. The report is preliminary because we want you to interact with it, bring to bear on the report your own experiences but most importantly offer us your critical comments so that the emergent report is a universal product. We look forward to the collaborations and hope to be enriched by the association.

I THANK YOU.

