



Dear Fellow South African,

At the end of the week, I will travel to Addis Ababa in Ethiopia for the African Union summit at which South Africa will assume chairship of our continental organisation for the next year.

We plan to use this great responsibility, among other things, to promote the economic empowerment of the women of Africa.

There has never been a better time to do so. With the African Continental Free Trade Area coming into operation this year, we have an opportunity to ensure that women and women-owned businesses are able to meaningfully benefit from what will be the world's largest common market for goods and services.

Just as there can be no real gender equality without economic emancipation for women, so too there can be no sustainable economic growth for any country unless women are full and equal participants.

South Africa's chairship coincides with the end of the African Women's Decade and the 25th anniversary of the landmark World Conference on Women, where UN member countries adopted the far-reaching Beijing Platform for Action towards greater equality and opportunity for women.

This is an opportunity for African countries to gauge the progress they have made to protect the fundamental freedoms of women. It is also an opportunity to

measure just how far we have come and what more needs to be done to broaden the economic participation of women.

We will need to acknowledge, for example, that the principle of equal pay for equal work is still not consistently applied. Women's participation in certain industries, especially in science and engineering-related fields, is still far lower than that of men. Women still carry the highest burden for child care and 'unpaid work' in the home. Women still occupy lower paid and lower skilled jobs. Despite employment equity legislation, there are fewer women than men in senior management roles, especially in business.

These are some of the inequalities that, together with other African countries, we aim to correct.

We want to use our term as AU chair to improve women's representation in economic and political decision-making processes in their home countries, in the AU, in the UN and in other multilateral organisations. We want policy and regulatory harmonisation across AU member countries that promote women's participation in the labour force but also in creating pathways to self-employment for women.

Importantly, this is a struggle that women themselves are leading, in different areas and in different ways.

In my recent meeting with the South African chapter of the International Women's Forum, for example, we had a forthright discussion not just on advancing women's leadership in society, but on a wide range of economic, policy and other issues.

It was valuable to hear from women business leaders about what areas we should be focusing on to grow the economy and create more jobs. They proposed a range of solutions to leverage the knowledge and digital economies as catalysts for growth and to support women's entrepreneurship.

They described the very real opportunities presented by 'new industries'. For women to be able participate in this economy of the future, there needs to be greater investment in science, technology, engineering and maths education. We have to scale up our support for female entrepreneurs, be it through the provision of seed capital, mentoring and training, or skills and knowledge transfer.

Eradicating gender-based violence, advancing affirmative action policies, supporting working mothers through the provision of affordable childcare, parental leave and flexible working hours, and making our public spaces safer for women are all necessary if women are to participate meaningfully in economic activity.

There is much we hope to achieve during our AU chairship. But there can be no greater achievement than giving the women of our continent greater control over their lives and the ability to make decisions to advance greater economic security and personal empowerment.

The economic empowerment of women will result in raised incomes and standards of living, in poverty alleviation and in more stable communities. By unleashing the economic potential of women, we are unleashing the potential of our economies to grow and benefit all.

As Thomas Sankara once said, there is no true social revolution without the liberation of women; nor can any society claim to be free “where half the people are held in silence”.

Empowering women is not a favour. It is not an option. It is a basic principle cherished by any society founded on human rights. It is fundamental to our vision of an Africa that is united, peaceful, prosperous and equal. If, as this year’s African Union chair, South Africa can lead the organisation to achieve this goal, it will be by far our greatest achievement.

With best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Cyril Ramaphosa". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.