



Monday, 08 March 2021

Dear Fellow South African,

Today is International Women's Day. For more than a century, this day has been celebrated across the world as part of the struggle to realise women's rights in the social, political, legal, reproductive, health and other spheres.

The Women's Charter, which was drawn up in 1994, notes that at the heart of women's marginalisation in South Africa are the attitudes and practices that "confine women to the domestic arena, and reserve for men the arena where political power and authority reside".

There can be no meaningful progress for women if our society continues to relegate women to 'traditional' professions, occupations or roles, while it is mainly men who sit on decision-making structures.

Fittingly, the theme of this year's International Women's Day is women's leadership and achieving an equal future in a COVID-19 world.

Since the coronavirus pandemic reached South Africa a year ago, the women of South Africa have played a pivotal role in the country's response.

We salute the resilience and bravery of women frontline workers, who worked to fight the pandemic as nurses, doctors, emergency personnel, police and soldiers.

These include the tragic stories of women like Nurse Petronella Benjamin from Eerste River in the Western Cape, who lost her life to COVID-19 just days before she was due to retire after 25 years as a nurse.

Our efforts to contain the pandemic have been greatly boosted by the thousands of fieldworkers like Azalet Dube from Doctors without Borders, who went into communities to raise awareness about the disease, who worked in health facilities as contract tracers, and who provided psycho-social support to families and individuals in distress.

The dedication of the nation's educators has ensured that our young people were able to receive an education despite the disruption caused by the pandemic. We owe a debt of gratitude to the many women who have worked as teachers, principals, lecturers and as administrators at institutions of higher learning.

We thank the women leading civil society organisations who worked and continue to work with the Ministerial Advisory Committee in driving a holistic approach to managing the pandemic.

We salute women like Nandi Msezane, who helped raise funds for food support in affected communities, and helped to provide access to mental health support for the LGBTQI+ community during the lockdown.

Vulnerable women and children affected by violence during the lockdown were helped thanks to the efforts of numerous non-governmental organisations (NGOs) led by and staffed by women.

This includes women like Fazila Gany, a longstanding member of the National Shelter Movement who also sadly passed away from COVID-19. The Movement has been critical in ensuring women and children at risk received support and access to services during the pandemic.

Women doctors, researchers and scientists have played and continue to play an important role in our epidemiological response. One of the COVID-19 vaccine clinical trials conducted last year, the Ensemble trial, was led by two female scientists, Prof Glenda Gray of the South African Medical Research Council and Prof Linda-Gail Bekker of the Desmond Tutu HIV Centre.

Research performed by academics on economic vulnerability and poverty trends in South Africa helped drive an informed relief response. Last year we lost one of the country's foremost experts on rural poverty, Dr Vuyo Mahlali. At the time she was studying the impact of the pandemic on food security in vulnerable communities, especially small scale farmers.

In the private sector, women business leaders have been visible in mobilising financial resources to support government's efforts.

The Solidarity Fund, which has played such a key role in this regard, is chaired by one of South Africa's most prominent businesswomen, Gloria Serobe. Women CEOs, board members and fund managers continue to play a leading role in pushing for their companies to support government's Economic Reconstruction and Recovery Plan.

No such tribute on this day would be complete without recognising the role of the women of this administration, whose efforts often go unacknowledged. It is women who lead the many government departments at the forefront of the national relief response.

I wish all the women of South Africa well on this day.

Our experience of this pandemic has once more demonstrated women's capacity to organise, collaborate, lead and achieve. Through their actions, they have demonstrated there is no such thing as 'a woman's place'.

The women of our country still face many challenges.

They are still under-represented in the boardrooms and corridors of power. They are still more likely to be poor and unemployed than their male counterparts. They are still vulnerable to gender-based violence and femicide.

But on this day, let us acknowledge how far we have come as a society thanks to the role of women leaders, particularly in helping the nation through this pandemic.

As we have struggled against this disease, women have been present and prominent in almost every arena of life.

This has set a standard for the kind of society we continue to build.

It has inspired and encouraged us to build an equal future.

With best regards,

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