



Monday, 09 August 2021

Dear Fellow South African,

Today we observe Women's Day.

In reflecting on the historic march of nearly 20,000 women to the Union Buildings in 1956 we recall that as much as it was a protest against the dehumanising pass laws, it was also an economic protest.

At the time, racial segregation, land dispossession, discrimination against black workers, influx control and the migrant labour system were destroying communities and tearing families apart.

Millions of women, particularly black women, were left to fend for themselves and to care for their families alone. Many were forced to seek domestic work in white homes in cities and towns. Others turned to activities like home brewing as a means of survival.

The new pass laws would have rendered them unemployable. Without being able to prove they had a right to be in an urban area, they could be arrested and 'deported' to the so-called homelands.

In one historical account, a woman attending the march said: "These passes make the road even narrower for us. We have seen unemployment, lack of accommodation and families broken because of passes. We have seen it with our men. Who will look after our children when we go to jail?"

By taking a stand they were fighting not only for their dignity, but for their right to move around the country freely in search of work, to earn a living and to keep their families together.

While these oppressive laws have been swept away, women in South Africa continue to bear the brunt of economic hardship.

A study conducted by Statistics South Africa in 2018 found that across all four race groups, between 74% and 92% of children lived with their mothers. Of this, African children under the age of 17 were

least likely to not stay with their biological father at home. Absentee fatherhood is a tragic phenomenon. It has a host of social implications and consequences for child development. It worsens economic hardship in female-headed households, particularly if there is no child support.

The rise in female-headed households, in unemployment among women, and now, the COVID-19 pandemic, have significantly worsened the material conditions of our country's women.

The economic empowerment of women is one of the pillars of the National Strategic Plan (NSP) to combat gender-based violence and femicide launched last year. It recognises that unless the economic drivers of gender-based violence are overcome, women and girls will remain vulnerable to abuse.

This Women's Day, we are releasing the one-year progress report on the NSP. It outlines the steps we have taken to advance economic opportunities for women. It provides progress on the implementation of our 40% preferential public procurement policy for women-owned businesses, as well as the extent of support given to women to start their own businesses.

The launch of the NSP coincided with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, and we had to rapidly reprioritise state resources to address its impact on health. At the same time we prioritised vulnerable women and children in the support provided to mitigate the economic impact of the pandemic.

Throughout the relief phase there were substantial cash transfers to women through the top-up of social grants and economic relief through the UIF TERS wage support and support to women-owned small businesses.

We recently announced the reinstatement of the COVID Special Relief of Distress Grant, which will now include unemployed caregivers, of which roughly 4.5 million are women.

Most of the participants in the Presidential Employment Stimulus are women. This includes 72% of teaching assistants, 65% of general school assistants, 87% of workers in the early childhood development sector, and 70% of the small-scale farmers that received support. Sixty-one per cent of the new jobs created through the expansion of the Global Business Services Incentive went to women.

As part of the state land allocation process, we are also working to ensure that women's access to productive assets such as land is being prioritised. To date about 60,000 hectares of the state land leases have benefited women.

Just as ending violence against women is a collective responsibility, so too is the economic empowerment of women.

We must ensure that workplaces and places of learning are safe for women and girls and that they are protected from harassment, violence and the practice of demanding sexual favours in return for jobs, marks, promotion or advancement. We must ensure that more shelters are made available to enable women and children to escape abusive relationships.

Working together as business, labour and civil society we must ensure that more economic opportunities are made available to women through the Economic Reconstruction and Recovery Plan, the Presidential Employment Stimulus and programmes initiated by the private sector.

Companies need to employ more women, promote them in higher numbers, and provide mentorship and other programmes to capacitate them.

As men, let us step up to our responsibilities to our children and our families. Let us not withhold financial support as a means of punishment or use it as a means of control over the women in our lives or our children.

We cannot achieve gender equality without economic emancipation. I call on all sectors of society to take ownership of the NSP and embed it into their work. We have the blueprint; let us now work together on its implementation.

The generation of 1956 stood up to claim their rights and assert their agency. Let us break the cycle of poverty affecting millions of South African women and build a truly non-sexist society.

I wish all South Africans a Happy Women's Day.

With best regards,

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