



Monday, 10 August 2020

Dear Fellow South African,

Yesterday, the country celebrated Women's Day. This occasion marks the anniversary of the day in 1956 when 20,000 women marched to the Union Buildings – a great sea of womankind speaking many languages, from different places and of all races. They were united in their demand for an end to the dreaded pass laws and for their right to live in freedom.

The status and position of women in South Africa today is vastly different to that faced by our mothers and grandmothers in 1956. We have come a long way in realising a South Africa that is non-racial, non-sexist, democratic, prosperous and free.

There has been real progress in improving the lives of South African women in the economy, in the political sphere and in public life.

At the same time, we know there is so much further we still have to go. Women still face discrimination, harassment and violence, and bear the greatest brunt of poverty.

If we are to truly realise the promise of our Constitution we have to tackle the economic and financial exclusion that makes women more vulnerable to abuse and violence.

We have joined a ground-breaking campaign that links us to global efforts to achieve gender equality by 2030. Generation Equality is an ambitious and transformative agenda to end discrimination and violence against women and for their equal participation in political, social and economic life.

As part of this campaign, we have joined two 'Action Coalitions', one for economic justice and rights and another against gender-based violence. Both of these themes are critical to our own national agenda.

Eleven months since the Emergency Response Action Plan to combat gender-based violence and femicide was implemented we have made progress in expanding support and care to survivors, and progress is being made in legal reforms to afford them greater protection.

This month we begin the implementation of the National Strategic Plan to combat gender-based violence and femicide. A key aspect of the plan is on ensuring greater women's financial inclusion. This is because economic inequality and social inequality are interconnected. The economic status of women in South Africa makes them more vulnerable to abuse. We must therefore scale up support for women to enable them to become financially independent.

We have made a number of commitments under Generation Equality that will be given effect to through the National Strategic Plan.

Firstly, we are going to drive women's economic inclusion through public procurement. We have set the target of ensuring that at least 40% of goods and services procured by public entities are sourced from women-owned businesses.

Secondly, we are going to scale up support for women-owned SMMEs and for women who work in the informal sector or are unemployed. This will include engagement with the financial sector to make financial services accessible and affordable for women.

Thirdly, we want to ensure more women have access to productive assets such as land. It is essential that women are beneficiaries of the accelerate land reform programme. It is significant that of the R75 million in COVID-19 relief earmarked for farming input vouchers 53% of the beneficiaries will be rural women. We must ensure that women subsistence and small-scale farmers continue to receive support beyond the pandemic.

Fourthly, we want to ensure that women are protected from gender-based violence in the workplace. In this regard, we will be working at a national and regional level towards the ratification of the ILO Convention on Violence and Harassment in the Workplace.

It is said that freedom is not given, but taken.

The emancipation of women is only words on paper unless it is matched by commitment from all sectors of society.

As we prepare for the reconstruction of our economy in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, we have said that we cannot simply return to where we were before the outbreak of the virus. We must build a fundamentally different economy which, among other things, substantially improves the material position of women.

This means that our investment in infrastructure must support not only the development of local industry, but also women-owned businesses. It must deliberately create employment opportunities for women in all stages of planning, financing, building and maintaining infrastructure. By the same measures, as we scale

up our public employment programmes, we must ensure that young women in particular are identified as participants. In addition to an income, these programmes will provide them with an opportunity to acquire some of the skills and experience necessary to enter the mainstream economy.

As much as it is government's responsibility to provide economic opportunities for women and create an enabling framework for advancing gender equality, everyone in society needs to play their part.

Businesses must support women-owned enterprises in the procurement of goods and services. They should employ more women and appoint more women to management positions.

This is all the more important considering that the private sector's record on gender-representation at management level lags behind that of the public sector. This is an issue that is repeatedly raised in engagements I have had with a number of women's business organisations. By equal measure, we must eliminate gender disparities in pay for men and women, and give effect to the principle of equal pay for equal work contained in the Employment Equity Act.

Women must also be protected from harassment and discrimination in the workplace. It is up to transport operators, university administrators, school governing bodies and religious organisations to create conditions for women and girls to travel, study and worship in safety.

We must forge ahead with our efforts to eradicate chauvinism, sexism and patriarchy. It is these attitudes that enable the oppression of women.

It is up to us – both men and women – to affirm that a woman's value, position and opinions are no less than that of a man. It is up to us as parents and grandparents to treat and raise our sons and our daughters the same.

It is up to us as men to reject and speak out against gender-based violence wherever we see it, even if it is against our friends, fathers or brothers.

Let us be the generation that ends the oppression of women in all its forms, in our lifetime. The brave generation of 1956 marched for us all. We owe it to them, to ourselves and to future generations to not betray this noble legacy.

With best wishes,

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

