



**MINISTRY IN THE PRESIDENCY FOR WOMEN, YOUTH AND PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES  
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA**

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**ADDRESS DELIVERED BY PROF HLENGIWE MKHIZE, DEPUTY MINISTER IN  
THE PRESIDENCY FOR WOMEN, YOUTH AND PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES  
TO THE INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY WEBINAR BY THE DEPARTMENT OF  
WOMEN, YOUTH AND PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES ON "WOMEN'S  
ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL INCLUSION IN THIS DECADE: ACCESSING  
OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN THROUGH THE AFRICAN CONTINENTAL FREE  
TRADE AREA (AfCFTA) AGREEMENT ON 08 MARCH 2021**

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Women in Green Industries

Representative from the Department of Trade, Industry and Competition

Government Officials

The Business Sector

Women's Organisations

Ladies and Gentlemen

All Protocol Observed

I greet you all with a happy International Women's Day. This is an important day when we take stock of the achievements and progress made in the advancement, empowerment and emancipation of women across the world. However it is also a day

when we assess challenges which continue to impede women and girls' empowerment and the achievement of gender equality.

As we approach our participation in the upcoming 65<sup>th</sup> Session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) from 15<sup>th</sup> -26 March, it is critical to reflect on issues that will be the basis for discussion during the two-session this year. The thematic focus is on "Women's full and effective participation and decision-making in public life, as well as the elimination of violence, for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls".

In 2020, the world marked the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 4<sup>th</sup> World Conference for Women and the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action by world leaders. The UN Secretary General noted in his Report on the review of Beijing +25 that whilst progress has been made across the globe in many areas on women's empowerment and gender equality, there are still many challenges that remain. He stated that no country in the world has achieved gender equality as yet, and that we need to accelerate efforts towards the goals of women's empowerment and gender equality.

In 2015, world leaders also adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and 17 SDGs. SGD 5 speaks to empowerment and equality for all women and girls. By 2030, it is expected that the world should meet the targets set out in Agenda 2030. One of which is Planet 50-50 by 2030! That means that we have under nine years to reach gender equality, equity and the empowerment of women.

Women's full and equal participation in leadership and decision-making positions is essential for achieving gender equality and driving sustainable development. Ensuring women's economic and financial inclusion therefore underpins the achievement of sustainable development, and will move us towards gender equality and planet 50-50 by 2030.

One of the interventions in this regard is the leveraging of opportunities through the African Continental Free Trade Area Agreement. In 2018, at the 10<sup>th</sup> Extraordinary Summit of the African Union almost all African countries signed the AfCFTA, thereby creating the largest free trade area in the world. The agreement connects 55 countries

and 1.3 billion people across the continent, with a combined GDP of AfCFTA economies valued at US\$ 3.4 trillion.

The AfCFTA agreement, according to the World Bank, has the potential to lift 30 million people out of extreme poverty. However to achieve its full potential depends on putting in place significant policy reforms and trade facilitation measures. The vast AfCFTA regional market that is created provides a major opportunity to help African countries to deal with economic turmoil brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, to diversify exports, accelerate growth and attract foreign direct investment into the continent. But most significantly it provides opportunities for women to benefit directly and indirectly from the trade opportunities created by the AfCFTA Agreement.

Trading under the historic AfCFTA Agreement commenced on 1 January 2021. Coinciding with this historic occasion is the start of the new Decade of Women's Financial and Economic Inclusion 2020-2030 which was adopted during the 33<sup>rd</sup> Ordinary Session of the African Union (AU) Heads of State and Government in 2020. As Chairperson of the AU in 2020, and as part of his opening statement at the 13th Extraordinary Session of the AU Assembly on the AfCFTA on 5 December 2020, President Ramaphosa underscored the importance of empowering African women in the AfCFTA. To give effect to this intention, the President highlighted the need for an AU Protocol on Women in Trade.

2021 becomes pivotal for both milestones in so far as it provides the opportunity for AU Member States who are party to the AfCFTA to drive creative and bold interventions that links women's financial and economic empowerment goals to inclusive AfCFTA implementation, particularly at the national levels.

Rapid developments at the continental and global level on the women and trade agenda are of strategic importance for South Africa particularly given that one of its priorities in the country remains women's economic empowerment and financial inclusion for a transformed and inclusive economy.

The AfCFTA provides a unique opportunity to competitively integrate into the global economy, reduce poverty and promote inclusion. It can boost productivity and job

creation, and thereby reduce poverty further. As the continent struggles to manage the fall-out from the COVID-19 pandemic, the AfCFTA can provide an anchor for long-term reform and integration.

The World Bank indicates that the AfCFTA would significantly boost African trade, particularly intraregional trade in manufacturing and that by 2035, the total volume of exports would increase by more than 29% relative to business as usual. They also predict that intra-continental exports would increase by more than 81%, while exports to non-African countries could rise by 19%. This creates new opportunities for African manufacturers and workers. I see a huge potential for women owned and led business to leverage these emerging opportunities.

Freer intra-African trade would help women by lowering the tariff rates; cut the red tape and through lowering the gender wage gap. The AfCFTA promotes entrepreneurship and economic empowerment opportunities for women-owned businesses through increased access to new regional export markets; and expanded opportunities across key sectors.

Notwithstanding the potential of the AfCFTA, gains for women will not be automatic. AfCFTA State Parties are expected to effectively implement commitments that advance the welfare of women. Maximising benefits from the AfCFTA Agreement will require an inclusive approach in its implementation that takes into account issues of gender equality and empowerment of women, young women, youth, persons with disabilities, particularly women and young women with disabilities, rural women, women informal traders, and women in SMMEs.

This is of vital importance given the global pandemic caused by COVID-19 and its deleterious and disproportionate effect and impact on the lives and livelihoods of these vulnerable categories of people. Entrenched poverty, unemployment and inequalities have been further exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic and exacerbated the socio-economic conditions faced by these vulnerable sectors. This means that it is highly unlikely that at the national level we can end poverty in all its forms, or meet any of the regional and global commitments and targets in this regard, any time soon. Closing the gap in labour force participation between men and women or in increasing possible

employment for women, youth and persons with disabilities seems an uphill battle in the years to come.

These lived realities therefore provides a compelling case for advancing women, youth and persons with disabilities' full and effective participation in the implementation of the AfCFTA at the national level and as part of the post-COVID-19 recovery measures.

Women are not a homogenous group. They make a strong contribution to trade and play multiple roles in the economy of the country as: (i) owners and/or entrepreneurs of micro and small enterprises; (ii) informal cross-border traders; (iii) small-scale traders and vendors; (iv) informal sector traders and vendors; workers, producers and entrepreneurs in strategic economic sectors, including agriculture, manufacturing, services and the green economy; and (v) formal sector entrepreneurs of large-scale enterprises / importers and exporters.

Globally, regionally and national women face high levels of marginalisation and discrimination. Many women are employed in low-paying, low-skilled jobs, and given reproductive role and gendered division of labour, many remain invisible in the economy. Gender, unpaid care work, informal labour and poverty co-exist and are inter-linked. The informal economy therefore remains an important source of income-generation and employment for multitudes of women, which remains a highly vulnerable sector given that it is a much unprotected sector in terms of labour laws and working conditions and benefits.

Given that South Africa geographically lends itself to bordering several neighbouring countries, it can be assumed that much informal cross-border trading occurs by women. These women are primarily breadwinners in their households and this form of income-generation is highly precarious and poses many threats to their safety, including gender based violence, rape and sexual offences.

In the agricultural sector where many women can be found, they remain low-skilled and low earning and mainly subsistence farmers with little to no access to formal markets, quality inputs or technological equipment. While their endeavours staves of basic household hunger, it does not provide food security for their families on a large

scale, many living off the land for day-to-day substance. Many women in the agricultural sector and small-scale farming do not own the land they work on, not do they necessarily own property or title deeds to the property. Many are unable to access credit, loans and grants as well as fertilisers, seeds, new technologies and support services in the form of extension services. Quite often these women are unable to integrate into value chains and improve their production levels or food quality standards.

Women in manufacturing face similar changes. Many women are found in the lower rungs of the economic ladder, in low-skilled and low-paying jobs. In the manufacturing sector women lack opportunities to up-skill and thus face a volatile retrenchment possibility due to market fluctuations and employment instability.

It is critical that women, youth and persons with disabilities' voices are heard in the national efforts to implement the AfCFTA agreement. Their participation in all national strategies including in decision-making on the implementation of the AfCFTA is critical for economic growth of the country and for ultimately attaining an inclusive and transformed economy in the country. The extent to which women, youth and persons with disabilities will be able to take advantage of opportunities created through the AfCFTA agreement in priority economic sectors, in e-commerce and regional value chains is dependent on the design and implementation of gender-responsive policies and complementary measures that reduce discrimination toward these sectors, while mitigating the potential risks from AfCFTA implementation.

In conclusion, Programme Director, what remains critical for us is to ensure concrete policy measures and investments, in particular to ensure that women and youth, who account for the majority of the population, business owners and workforce, can be better integrated into the value-chains, jobs and opportunities stemming from the AfCFTA agreement. This Agreement is central to our recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic and enhancing our resilience and that of the Continent in the future. Trade of all types of goods and services underpins efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and Agenda 2063 of the AU. Ensuring women's economic and financial inclusion now will help us attain SDG 5 for all women and girls by 2030.

**I Thank You!**