

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

**KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY
MINISTER SINDISIWE CHIKUNGA MP,**

WOMEN'S MONTH 2025 LAUNCH

Event Title:

**EmpowerHer Market: Celebrating Women's Economic
Power**

Theme:

***"Building Resilient Economies for All" (Women Leading
the Future of Trade).***

Date: 1 AUGUST 2025

- **Deputy Minister in the Presidency for Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities, Honourable Steve Letsike,**
- **Director-General of the Department, Advocate Mikateko Maluleke,**
- **Women Entrepreneurs Present.**
- **Representatives of Civil Society Organisation**
- **Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen**
- **Good Morning**

1. BACKGROUND: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF WOMEN'S MONTH 2025

Programme Director,

Women's Month in South Africa stands as one of the most powerful illustrations of how a heritage of resistance has evolved into sustained advocacy for systemic change. Our celebration is deeply rooted in what may be called *embodied resistance*—the physical act of 20,000 women marching to the Union Buildings on 9 August 1956 to eliminate **laws that fundamentally restricted their autonomy, citizenship, and right to self-determination.**

The pass laws were not mere administrative inconveniences; **they were tools of control that relegated African women to a subordinate status** within both racial and patriarchal hierarchies. In marching, these women were resisting what Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw would later conceptualize as *intersectionality*—the overlapping systems of oppression based on race, gender, and class that created uniquely compounded forms of discrimination for African women.

What makes Women's Month particularly significant is how our struggle has evolved from **resistance to reconstruction, from wanting mere inclusion to demanding a fundamental restructuring of power relations.** Today, building on the legacy of 1956, **our transformation agenda is much more daring to the patriarchal script.** Our agenda is rooted in centuries of systemic exclusion that relegated women to subordinate positions across

virtually every sphere of human activity. At its core, our movement for gender equality seeks to uproot entrenched patriarchal structures that have historically denied women equal participation in economic, political, social and scientific spheres of life.

2. SUMMARY OF KEY ACHIEVEMENTS AND EMPOWERMENT PRIORITIES GOING FORWARD

Programme Director, since August 2024, our President has led from the front in giving teeth and enforcement powers to the struggle for gender equality and women's empowerment.

- The significance of appointing **Justice Mandisa Maya as the first South African woman to occupy the position of Chief Justice and Head of the Constitutional Court**, cannot be overstated. Today, South African women hold 43.5% of the seats in Parliament, occupying 171 out of 400 seats—an increase from 28% representation in 1994.
- The **Signing of the Public Procurement Bill** and the **Land Expropriation Act** are clear signs of our commitment to gender-responsive land redistribution and related productive assets.
- The **establishment of the R20 Billion a year Transformation Fund** and its emphasis on supporting emerging women industrialists and SMMEs affirms our bold commitment to transformation.

- The **National Council on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide (NCGBVF) Act** has now been passed, and the process of establishing the National Council is underway.

Another major achievement has been the **ongoing success of our G20 Activities**. More recently, under the leadership of South Africa's G20 Presidency, our Chairship of the Empowerment of Women Working Group has elevated three overarching priorities: (a) policy perspectives on the care economy, (b) financial inclusion, and (c) the elimination of gender-based violence.

CARE ECONOMY: *On the Care Economy our* working group is rallying governments to **not only recognize but value the care economy**, which encompasses both **unpaid and underpaid labor** that sustains families, communities and economies worldwide. Today, Women perform approximately 75% of the world's unpaid care work, **valued at trillions of dollars globally**, yet they remain systematically excluded from economic calculations and policy considerations.

This invisible labor - from childcare and eldercare to household management and community support - has historically been dismissed as "natural" women's work rather than recognized as the very foundation of all economic activities.

Yesterday, I attended a Nedbank Conference in this very building, where one of the speakers made a point worth repeating. She said: *"All companies, both public and private, must ensure that their investment and leadership representation **mirrors the***

demographics of their sources of profit.” The same principle applies to those whose invisible labor sustains our society and economy every single day.

FINANCIAL INCLUSION: We have also elevated *Financial Inclusion* as a critical instrument for women's economic empowerment. For us, True financial inclusion must therefore be understood as a structural intervention to redistribute opportunity, autonomy, and economic agency to women.

GBVF: On **Gender-based Violence and Femicide** , we have managed to rally G20 Member States and local partners to strengthen our work against emerging forms of GBVF such as online harassment and technology-facilitated abuse, which increasingly weaponize digital platforms to silence, surveil, and intimidate women.

3. PRIORITIES GOING FORWARD:

Going forward, over the next five years, our focus will be on enforcement powers that enable us to model, monitor, evaluate, and ensure accountability.

Once enacted, our **Promotion of Women's Rights, Empowerment, and Gender Equality Bill will** institutionalise gender-responsive planning, budgeting, procurement, and service delivery across all organs of state, and will provide the enforcement mechanisms that have long been missing.

To effectively institutionalise and implement economic empowerment of businesses owned by women, youth, and persons with disabilities,

we are working with the National Treasury to fast-track the regulations of the Public Procurement Act.

In addition to our department's economic empowerment strategy, we have developed a **socio-economic empowerment index** through which we will be able to track empowerment and participation across socio-economic sectors, thus promoting a deeper analysis of systemic barriers affecting women's economic empowerment.

To move from intent to impact - we have requested the **Women's Economic Assembly** to **urgently study the anatomy of government expenditure**, as well as **supply chain patterns**. This will enable us to **break free from entrenched barriers to market entry** and **reimagine a women-led industrial and productive revolution**. No sector should be beyond our reach.

Moreover, we need new indicators of economic progress that enable us to measure what matters. This is particularly important when you look at how **both paid and unpaid care work (the care economy)** remains largely undervalued and unaccounted for.

4. BUILDING RESILIENT ECONOMIES FOR ALL- WOMEN LEADING THE FUTURE OF TRADE

Programme Director, looking into the future, with regard to Building Resilient Economies for All, we would like to foreground the following principles:

First, for as long as **wealth and income inequality persists along gender lines**, there can be no resilient economies for all. A resilient economy is one that should be able to withstand, adapt to, and recover from various shocks and disruptions while maintaining its ability to grow. And certainly, no economy can be truly resilient for all when half of its population is economically marginalized.

It is important to emphasize that, for us, financial inclusion goes far beyond access to banking—it represents a fundamental shift in economic power. This struggle includes **challenging discriminatory lending practices, advocating for property rights reforms** that allow women to use assets as collateral, and **confronting cultural norms that position men as the primary financial decision-makers**.

Secondly, True economic resilience requires a deliberate reconstruction of systems and structures that harness the full productive potential of all citizens, with particular attention to those who have been historically excluded from economic power - this is inclusive of women from all walks of life.

Programme Director,

All evidence points to the fact that our continent represents the very future of trade and market success. Africa has been at the center of this population growth – accounting for the largest relative growth, with its population expanding from 283 million in 1960 to more than 1.5 billion in 2024 – a more than five-fold increase. This is projected to increase by 950 million and touch 2.5 billion by the year 2050.

This population represents **a largely untapped market** that must be **connected through technology**, a market that must be fed from **our arable land**, a market that must travel, a market that must be **entertained** and a market that must be **well dressed**. In short, the market is at our doorstep, let's innovate around it.

4. WHY WE NEED WOMEN AT THE FOREFRONT OF THE AFRICAN MARKET AND TRADE

We need women at the forefront of the African market because traditional trade models—dominated by male-centered networks and structures—have proven insufficient in confronting the paradox of a wealthy Africa that is inhabited by poor Africans. Research evidence has consistently shown that economies with higher levels of women's participation in trade enjoy greater resilience, innovation, and sustainable growth patterns.

We also know that women-led businesses **tend to prioritize societal well-being over pure profit maximization**. They invest heavily in their communities and display superior crisis management capabilities—qualities that are essential for building resilient economies for all. Women in trade, therefore, represent a strategic capability for creating robust and adaptive economies that serve all citizens in an increasingly unequal world.

However, despite this wealth of evidence, numerous barriers continue to limit women's ability to reap the full rewards of international trade across the continent. **Limited use of ICTs** (which impacts access to information and markets), **excessive red tape**,

logistical hurdles, and border and administrative obstacles all conspire to hinder women's effective participation in international trade.

In light of these challenges, policymakers, businesses, and development financiers are called upon to intensify their efforts to eliminate these barriers and expand trade opportunities for women. Going forward, we need to intensify work in the following areas:

First, we need a **Comprehensive Financial Architecture Reform** that establishes gender-responsive financial systems capable of addressing women's unique economic realities. This includes the creation of women-focused investment funds that provide patient capital—capital with flexible, longer payback periods suited to the nature of women-led businesses. It also requires developing **alternative credit scoring mechanisms** that recognize informal economic activities, where many women are concentrated.

At the Nedbank Empowerment Conference yesterday, I reiterated that financial institutions must adopt **collateral-free lending programs**, recognizing that women's limited property ownership should not exclude them from accessing capital.

Additionally, **blended finance mechanisms**—which combine public and private funding—will help de-risk investment while providing women entrepreneurs with the patient capital needed **to build sustainable, export-ready businesses.**

Secondly, we require a **Transformation of Legal and Regulatory Frameworks** to remove laws and policies that directly or indirectly discriminate against women in trade.

Thirdly, we need to urgently invest in **Capacity Building and Skills Development Ecosystems** in a manner that closes the knowledge and skills gaps that prevent women from fully participating in international trade. In addition to **trade training programs**, we need Digital platforms that deliver accessible information on **export procedures, market opportunities, and regulatory requirements** in multiple languages and formats.

Mentorship programs should connect experienced women exporters with emerging entrepreneurs, enabling the transfer of both technical knowledge and cultural navigation skills essential for succeeding in global markets. Our Universities and vocational institutions must integrate **gender-responsive trade curricula** that address both hard and soft skills needed to navigate male-dominated business environments.

In conclusion,

I wish to leave us with the words of the UN General Secretary, António Guterres when he said:

"When women and girls can rise, we all thrive." Our choices, whether those of action or inaction, are who we are. They are the record by which we are judged."

Today, as we stand at the threshold of Africa's demographic dividend, we have an unprecedented opportunity to ensure that African development is -front back and centre- women led.

The market is indeed at our doorstep—a continent of over 1.5 billion people with immense potential. The choice is ours: we can continue with business as usual and risk perpetuating the painful paradox of a wealthy Africa inhabited by impoverished Africans, or we can embrace the transformative power of women's economic leadership to build truly resilient economies that serve all our people. I trust that together, we will choose transformation.

It is at this point that I have the honour of declaring the 2025 Women's Month - under the theme building resilient economies for all, **officially launched!**

I thank you.