

Address by Local Government and Housing MEC Maite Nkoana-Mashabane at the launch of the Mopani District South African Women in Dialogue (SAWID)

06 August 2005

Programme Facilitator;

Honourable First Lady of the Province, Mrs Ramokone Moloto;

My colleague in the EXCO, MEC MEC Dikeledi Magadzi;

Representatives of the various Provincial Departments;

My partners in service delivery at local government level, representatives of various District and local municipalities;

Members of civil society organizations;

Ladies and Gentlemen:

The launch of the Mopani District South African Women in Dialogue comes at an opportune time for the women of this Province. This launch is taking place at a time when the country has began its celebrations of the fiftieth anniversary of that historic document called the Freedom Charter. When adopting this seminal document in 1955, the ANC then declared, among others, that "there shall be housing, security and comfort" for all peoples of this country – including women, who had for a long time in the history of our country been excluded from participating in decision-making processes of our country. The Freedom Charter declarations guaranteed, for the first time in the history of our country, that all opinions and views of the peoples of this country be considered when critical decisions are made – whether these decisions were to be taken at national, provincial or local government level.

The launch also takes place when the country is busy celebrating Women's Month and the tenth anniversary of our country celebrating Women's Day. What this means, ladies and gentlemen, is that as we are gathered here today, we stand at a particularly important juncture in our history where women's issues are beginning to receive the necessary attention they deserve. I am certain that wherever they are, our grandmothers, aunts and sisters who participated in the Women's March of 1956 are looking down upon us and looking at how we, the generations which benefited from their hard work, are taking their dreams of having women's issues on the agenda of our country forward. We cannot afford to disappoint them.

It is often said that if you invest in a man, you invest in an individual. But invest in a woman, and you invest in the entire nation. The logic behind this adage is simple. Women have, since time immemorial, always been at the forefront of building nations and developing communities. Women have shown many a time that whatever is put into them by society, they can use that little to accelerate the development of our communities and stretch the benefits of that investment.

The history of our country provides ample examples of how the development of women and the participation of women in the running of communities can make a huge impact on the type of society we are building. When the migrant labour system – complimented by the Bantustan system – took men away from our communities, it was our mothers, grandmothers and sisters who kept our communities together. When, as it was often the case, the men in the mines in Gauteng sent little money

back to their families, it was us, the women of this country, who found innovative ways such as mekgodisano, stokvels and burial societies to keep our communities going and stretch the little funds which we had. These community-support organizations have, I believe, proven beyond doubt that women are, in most cases, natural service delivery agents.

As we enter the Second Decade of our Freedom, we have to again call on women to tap into those talents in order to make the declarations of the Freedom Charter real to the people of this Province. The question we have to ask ourselves is: how can we ensure that women's talents and skills are best deployed by this Province in order to achieve our goals of providing a better life for all?

I believe that one of the most important areas where women can make a meaningful and lasting contribution is at the sphere of local government. It is my strong conviction that given the necessary support and opportunity, the skills and talents of women can help us develop local authorities which are caring, effective and responsive to the needs of our people. After all, the many experiences which women have had of juggling many responsibilities such as work and family have put us in a unique position. Those multiple management skills are sorely – and urgently – needed within our Districts and Municipalities.

Honourable First Lady, friends

I believe that the call for a 50/50 representation following the upcoming local government elections, reiterated in the SALGA Women in Local Government Summit in Benoni this year, will provide us with an excellent opportunity to put more women in their rightful positions of leadership at this important level of government. The SALGA Benoni Declaration was further endorsed by SALGA's national decision body and the African National Congress at its last National General Council. What this does, ladies and gentlemen, is make the 50/50 representation more than just a slogan but a programme which will need to be vehemently pursued by ourselves, our Districts and local municipalities. This decision is truly worthy of all of our support. This is particularly true if we look at the number of women who occupy management and other leadership positions in our municipalities. At our last count, of all the 1 238 councillors in our municipalities – only 313 were women. Ladies and gentlemen, that represents an embarrassing 25 percent of all councillors. In this District of Mopani and its local municipalities, out of 242 councillors, only 55 are of the feminine side. Surely this must be wrong, especially when women continue to be the largest number of those who bring in the votes come election time.

Women are also still very much under-represented in other decision-making bodies at local government level. We say this because in other critical positions of power within local government such as financial management, there are still very few women who are taking up those crucial positions. In fact, we have less than five women who are municipal managers in our Province and this needs to be changed with immediate effect.

We call on women in this Province to become an integral part of local government by taking up more leadership positions. We cannot afford to be sheep and forever be shepherded by men. We have to come in our large numbers come September 3 and register to vote for the upcoming elections so that issues affecting us are placed high on the local government agenda.

If local government continues to be an exclusive Boys' Club as the statistics show, I can vouch for you today that important issues affecting us will remain on the sidelines. Issues which face many women in our Province such as HIV/Aids, abuse at work and at home and femicide – this senseless killing of our mothers and sisters which seems to be popular in our Province – all these will remain slogans and never be vigorously tackled if we, those who bear the brunt, are not in decision-making levels at local government. All these issues which affect us daily will not be sufficiently attended to if we are on the fringes of decision-making processes. Ladies and gentlemen, I cannot emphasise more how important it is that we include more women in leadership positions in our municipalities.

I must add that even my Department does not fare very well when it comes to the employment of women in management positions. By May this year, women made up only about 25 percent of the total workforce. Since my assumption of duties, I have given a directive that more work be done to change this unfair state of affairs

Ladies and gentlemen,

In order for us to ensure that there are "houses, security and comfort" we would need a more active participation of women in local government bodies. Currently, when we look at our Department and all the blocked or stalled projects, we find that they are, in the most, run by men. It is my belief that once more women come up to take up housing and local government projects, this situation can be changed. Surely women's experiences in running community organisations such as mekgodisano and other poverty alleviation projects puts us in a unique positions to run projects which deliver tangible results for our communities. Ladies and gentlemen, we do have the experience and expertise in this Province and it lies within the hidden talents of our women.

Women must also take up positions within structures such as the Provincial Disaster Management Advisory Forum, which my Department launched yesterday. On awarding certificates to members of this Forum, we discovered that only one member was a woman. We congratulate the Department of Education for providing us with that experienced woman to help avert disasters in the Province. We further call on all municipalities and Districts to forward the names of more women to assist the work of this important body.

This week we also launched the Local Government Support Fund, which is being supported by the European Union. This Fund supports LED projects in the Province and we urge all women's organizations to come forward with practical and tangible projects for consideration by this body. It is by taking advantage of these opportunities that we will be celebrating the declaration of the Freedom Charter that there shall be "housing, security and comfort." There will be a presentation by the LED on the matter and I urge all women to strongly consider exploiting this opportunity.

Honourable First Lady, friends

Our mothers and grandmothers fought hard and suffered great losses in order for us to ultimately be seated at such a gathering today. Many were humiliated and called names simply because they dared to be seen as equals to men. Today, we have an opportunity to honour their legacy by celebrating their inputs into the shaping of this

country. What then would be a better way of magnifying that honour than by registering in large numbers for the local government elections and nominating as many women as possible to become leaders within local government?

We must remember: We have not been given the chance to be leaders, we have taken that opportunity after centuries of blood, sweat and tears. We cannot afford to lose the momentum!

As we continue with the Freedom Charter and Women's Month celebrations, we must remember that Sotho proverb that says "mmago ngwana o thswara thipa ka bogaleng" and continue our age-old tradition of leading from the front. Our government has created the environment for women to take up their rightful positions in our communities, we cannot afford to miss this chance.

Wathint' umfazi wathint imbokodo.

Thank you.