

**MEC FOR PUBLIC WORKS MACHWENE SEMENYA'S ADDRESS AT  
THE WOMEN IN CONSTRUCTION CONFERENCE HELD IN BELA-  
BELA ON 20, OCTOBER 2006**

The Head of Department for Public works, Mr Johannes Rantete

Representatives from ABSA

Representatives from SARS

Representatives from the CIDB

Representatives from LIBSA

Officials from the department

Our special guests today, the women who are in construction

Everybody present here today

Programme Director

Our country is at a stage where it has defined itself. It possesses the most egalitarian constitution in the world and continues to be a case study on what many see as a miraculous transition from patriarchy to where we are.

In his inaugural speech as the President of a free South Africa, Nelson Mandela said, "Freedom cannot be achieved unless women have been

emancipated from all forms of oppression.” That was and remains the ideal for which our government is striving.

Our constitution declares, in very unambiguous terms, equality of all South Africans as a basis of existence. The constitution deliberately defies the rules of patriarchy and encourages a nation that sees individual’s roles and responsibilities in the context of ability, natural and cultivated.

However, we should concede that to practicalise the intent for a gender balance, we need to address the challenges we are still facing, as the gender biased imbalance continues to exist.

Programme Director, these imbalances taking place in this industry is directly linked to societal modes of operation inherited from our past, wherein certain jobs were a preserve of a particular gender.

This historical imbalance continues to give unequal access to sufficient capital for women to sustain their efforts aimed at making a mark in this industry.

Of the various institutions that are in the building and construction services, an overwhelming majority remains male-led and owned.

We may, however, be pleased with the fact that through government policies and procedures a number of women seem to be having a share of the industry's captaincy. And some of you are present here today, adding to the value of the infrastructure in the province.

This, Programme Director, prescribes that you seated here as women professionals and protagonists of women empowerment already in the industry have a dual responsibility. On the one hand, you have to increase your skills level to ensure that the changes are practicable and sustainable. On the other hand, you should make deliberate efforts to unfasten this indirect restricted access that seems to face women attempting to penetrate into this industry.

It is also important that those that are not directly involved in creating these opportunities for women, should not just be armchair critics but should, at the slightest, play an advocacy role.

Programme Director, the statistics on women participation in this industry discourages silence on the hopeless corner that women are residing.

Data released by Statistics South Africa suggests that in the construction industry the workforce is grossly dominated by the male gender. Males make up 91% whilst females occupy an uninspiring 9%. Of that measly

9%, black women constitute the majority of women who are at the lowest levels.

The imperative is that women need to play a role that improves their livelihoods, not as part of the general workforce, but also equally as part of the leadership that steers the direction of the industry.

The private sector and government must join hands in ensuring sufficient tutoring and empowering the subjects. Training support is necessary as it will allow women to elevate their skill levels in both the technical and business necessities for survival in this industry. Towards this end government is currently engaged in programmes like Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP), which is aimed at fighting poverty by creating sustainable temporary jobs and at the same time imparting skills, through training.

This poses a cardinal question on what needs to be done empower women in an industry that is so overwhelmingly male dominated.

Programme Director, the world has chosen South Africa to host the only Soccer World Cup held on African soil. At every facet of our society, from the sporting to the business fraternity, this has taken the centre stage. South Africa, according to analysts, stands to rake in a substantial amount of money, with all the soccer loving fans of the world expected to descend in our shores. The construction sector is also expected to yield substantial

amount of money. Currently, different institutions are constructing and upgrading stadia, hotels, roads and other necessities that are expected for a show of this magnitude. The question that we need to ask ourselves is – how much of this cake is reserved for women or how much of this cake are we as women prepared to claim as ours and be a force to be reckoned with. Let's make this indeed an Age of Hope as envisioned by our state president, Thabo Mbeki earlier this year.

Programme Director as I conclude...

Mahatma Gandhi asserts that his “notion of democracy is that under it, the weakest should have the same opportunity as the strongest. This opportunity does not fall from the sky. We **discuss** and exchange views. Therefore, on women involvement in construction our mandate should be premised on a single goal – elevating women to their rightful positions.

I thank you.