

**Notes for a speech by the Deputy Minister of Finance to Gender Forum, National Treasury,  
August 8 2000**

Deputy Minister

Colleagues

We meet again in the same room where we were talking about Aids. Now we meet on another important occasion, when the national focus today and tomorrow will be on the women in the country.

When we think of the role of women we think of the great march of August 9, 1956. But one of the earliest recorded activities of women's political activity was of them opposing the 1913 Land Act which finally dispossessed black people.

Likewise, two years before the great and courageous march of the women on the Union Buildings, a group of many of the same women met in the Trades Hall of Johannesburg. It was April 1954, and the meeting was really an early attempt to bring together women of all races to fight for a freedom that then seemed so elusive.

It was a complicated freedom for women. The Women's Charter they drew up at that meeting confirmed that. On the one hand, the Charter said: "As women we share the problems and anxieties of our men and join hands with them to remove social evils and obstacles to progress."

But the Charter also said: "As women there rests upon us also the burden of removing from our society all the social difference developed in past times between men and women which have the effect of keeping our sex in a position of inferiority and subordination."

It went further. Allow me to quote from the preamble: "The level of civilisation which any society has reached can be measured by the degree of freedom that its members enjoy. The status of women is a test of civilisation. Measured by that standard, South Africa must be considered low in the scale of civilised nations."

It was indeed a difficult battle the women had embarked on. Two years later, at an anti-pass meeting which preceded the great women's march, a male speaker said: "The government cannot give your women a pass if you do not want to, because the woman she is under the control of a man."

There are still tales that the greatest shock to men when their wives were arrested in anti-pass demonstrations was that they had to cook and look after children.

The question we have to face now, today, is what our level of civilisation is. Can we answer that question that our grandmothers put on the table for us 45 years ago?

This is not a "women's question, although it was posed by women. Today we are brought up in particular ways and to change those realities (about men and women), we need to engage.

The important point to realise is that the struggle for gender equality is not some new-fashioned buzzword for modern women. This has been part of the development of our struggle. We have had to confront gender equality, and the question of whether it should be a separate struggle or not. The answer we arrived at was that it had to be part and parcel of our struggle for liberation.

So, today, do we pass the test of civilisation?

How are relations between men and women?

In many ways we've made great strides. We have more female parliamentarians than many countries including developed countries like the United Kingdom. We have one of the highest proportions of women as cabinet ministers in the world.

Yet how representative is that of other sectors in our society. In the highest echelons of business, of the media, of almost every key sector in our society, there are only a handful of women.

In fact, I remember when I chaired the Parliamentary Finance Committee and I had to attend a meeting of a Reserve Bank committee; I went into that meeting and got a great shock because everyone there was a white male.

Overall, in our economy, according to a study done a few years ago, women made up only 13 percent of management in companies despite comprising two thirds of the workforce.

Why?

One reason is simple. The Economist, in a special report on women in management summed it up: "People who work in large organisations have an innate tendency to hire and promote those who resemble themselves."

Our government has been well aware of this tendency, which is why we've tried hard to increase the diversity of our people at all levels of public representation and we're promoting that in business too.

(And we must also make the point that the challenges we face are not just about race and gender. There is also the issue of disabled people, people who can make a real contribution to the workplace, and who should not be excluded.)

We need to heed history's warning. Political power alone doesn't bring change for women. We only have to look at the example of the previous government. They had political power for more than 40 years, but where were the women? Where were the women cabinet ministers, lawyers, judges, and businesswomen?

You'll remember the song the women sang in 1956 when they marched to the Union Buildings; Wena Strijdom. Wathintha Abafazi, wathintha imbokodo. Uzakufa."

It was brave, an extraordinary show of boldness to the most powerful man in the country – the Prime Minister. But listen to what his own daughter, years later, told a magazine about her place in the world: "The women's role was to look after the future of the volk."

This reflected a situation where the former moderator of the Dutch Reformed Church, only a few years ago, could argue that, in 80 percent of rape cases, women had provoked the rape.

This is something that is very unfortunate. These are stereotypes and they continue to exist. Until recently our own law put a heavier onus on women to prove rape, so in the judicial system the odds were weighed against women. And people wonder why more rapes aren't reported.

Freedom is indeed complex, as is civilisation.

We, men and women, need to ask the hard questions: have we attained our freedom here, have we reached the civilisation envisaged by those early anti-pass protestors in 1954?

The census in 1996 showed that women formed a majority in South Africa – 54% -- so then what is the meaning of freedom and democracy if women are suppressed. This is a very important issue. It strikes at the heart of freedom.

When we look at the level of violence against women, when we look at the burden that women must bear, not only in the ordinary work of the home, but now too as the main sufferers of the Aids epidemic, our answer must sadly be no.

Freedom is complex and it is indivisible. Just as we could not have freedom for white people, but none for black people, so we cannot have freedom for men and not for women.

The tragedy of Aids is a sign of how some people's lack of freedom affects us all. In Africa, where more than 23 million people have Aids, more than half are women. Worse than that, new statistics show that eight times as many adolescent girls in Africa are living with HIV/Aids than young males the same age.

Unless men start taking responsibility for women's freedom and right to choose, the whole society will unravel. Then we'll learn the hard way that freedom is indeed indivisible.

We know that women need practical things from our government: in many ways we have tried to do that. We have shifted our social spending so that more than half now goes to the poorest 40% -- most of whom are women living in rural areas. We know that women who work in offices need practical support too – such as childcare facilities, or different office hours, so they take their place in the working world.

It reminds me of an analogy that someone drew from this issue in relation to career development for women. The way in which our society functions, if a man gets a job in Cape Town, the family moves, but would the same happen if a woman got a job somewhere else?

We should realise that we are not necessarily doing women any favours by making it easier for them to work. Women's economic advancement is a key indicator of development in many countries, and because their money usually goes directly into supporting families, it is an important engine of development for the whole society.

So -- and I'm talking to the men -- when we talk about development, let's start by looking at our own relationships, with the women we work with, the women we live with, the women we love.

When we've got those right, we'll realise the dreams of those women who marched for freedom so many years ago: we will attain both freedom and civilisation.