Women’s’ Role Modelling Conference

In commemoration of Mama Albertina Sisulu

20-21 November 2018

Bengu International Convention Centre, Lilongwe, Malawi

Speech given by Hon. Thoko Didiza, MP (South Africa)

Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP)

Africa Region Chairperson

“The life of struggle and triumph”
It is with honour and privilege that I accepted the invitation to be with you today. As a Women public representative and an activist for gender equality, I accepted the invitation with open arms, because in my capacity as a Chairperson of the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians, this invitation came at an opportune time when we are concerned about the numbers of women in Parliaments and legislators. In some countries of the Commonwealth in particular here in our Continent, we have observed that while in some countries we have seen an increase in the numbers of women in Parliaments and legislators, such an increase has been marginal. In other countries we have observed a decline.

Sadly, this situation is not of concern to many in our society. Because others argue why do we need more numbers in Parliaments and legislators. In attempting to answer this question Hon. Frene Ginwala had this to say, “The seed of democracy lies in the principle that the legitimacy of the power to make decisions about people’s lives, their society and their country should derive from a choice by those who are affected”.

Women in our societies are not just in the majority, but they are impacted upon by the decisions that are made without their inclusion and participation. Though Women have won the franchise to vote, and be voted for, their representation has not increased to a level in which we can be satisfied.

Ginwala, goes further to say “While the debate about enfranchisement of women and participation of women in decision making often focuses on issues of justice, equity and human rights, the representation of women and the inclusion of their perspective and experience into the decision-making process will inevitably lead to solutions that are more viable and satisfy the broader range of society. That is why Women should be part of the process and it matters: all of society benefits as we find better and more appropriate solutions to our problem.”

So, today we are here because of our concerns that our society is impoverished if our experience and perspective is missing or limited in decision making institutions of our country. In order for us to achieve gender parity more needs to be done. Through the experience of others who have walked this road before us we can learn and make them our role models.
Many times we ask ourselves what are the constraints that hinder women participation. Various reasons can be advanced, however there are those that are common across countries and regions. Women’s political participation is hindered by societal stereotypes which in large measure are social constructs formed by the patriarchal nature of our society and embraced by ourselves as women. For instance, there, particular narratives that have become norms such as the place of a women in in the kitchen. Women are nurturers and caregivers and therefore they must be the ones that raise children and even the choice of their careers must be consistent with this narrative.

Some of the constrains relate to culture and religion that continuously get used to define the role and place of women in society. In addition to these are legal frameworks that do not enforce women participation and at time framed as gender neutral.

Other constraints relate to women’s political participation and assuming political leadership within political parties they belong too. In most instances Women will be encouraged to participate in women’s wing of political parties as a way of curtailing their access to positions of power and leadership.

The portrayal of women in the media. The challenge is that Media houses will dwell much more on women’s dress code, and hairstyles as opposed to what women have said. At times it is argued that Women to not know how to present their case in a manner that will make news.

Money in politics have also added a barrier to women’s participation in politics particularly where women have to campaign and gain support from their parties so that they get nominated and elected in primaries. The money factor presents itself in the campaigns, such as communication and propaganda materials, doing something’s for constituencies so that they can elect one to office, patronage at times can be through vote buying.

During the two days, we will learn the ropes of how we can increase our chances to be nominated and finally elected. We are not only here to be trained, but we are also here to
reflect on the lives of other women and through their lives be inspired and learn what we can do in our life time.

Given all the constraints mentioned above, what can we learn from women who had gone before us, who remain our role models and inspire us to continue to fight for the total emancipation of Women and women’s inclusion in decision making structures.

Who are our role models?
Today I will share with you how Mama Albertina Sisulu’s life inspired many of us in South Africa, Southern Africa, in our Continent and Globally. Hers was a life of struggle and triumph. But, I decided to start here at home in Malawi. Women like Vera Chirwa played their part in the liberation of Malawi from the British. Talking about her experience of March 1959 during the rise of popular movement for liberation of Malawi and the clamp down by the British forces through the state of emergency, she had this to say:

“And when all this was happening, I was only a young lady-a mother of one. Our first born- a daughter was taken to live at Orton’s brother, Crosby Chiwara. And Orton asked me: Are you afraid.? I said I am not. we are fighting for our land. We are fighting for the marginalized Africans. We are fighting for the rights of the marginalized women. We are fighting for the future of our children.” Vera Chirwa on the March 3, 1959 events of the declaration of the state of emergency by the then British Settlers in the then Nyasaland.

Our experience may be different today from that of Vera, but what propels us remain the same ...We want to be elected and be there in deciding about our country because this is our land. We want to be in these structures because we are fighting for the marginalized Africans who still live under extreme poverty. We want to be in these boardrooms because we are still fighting for the rights of marginalized women, some of whom are raped and killed. We want to be there, because we must secure the future of our children and in particular the girl child whose future at times gets curtailed because she can be married at an early age. The girl child who miss days in her academic year because her mother cannot afford sanitary towels. We want to be there because we believe public life is a social contract between government and
citizens, not government and man. We want to be in Parliaments in order to make laws that will benefit from lived experience of all society both women and men.

Madam, Chairperson, honoured Guests, the story of Vera Chirwa is a reminder of our history of struggle and triumph. A history of struggle of both women and men in the liberation of Africa. It is a reminder that women’s emancipation and gender equality was and will always be at the Centre of development of any nation and society.

Madam Chairperson, Like Vera Chirwa, whom we celebrate and those of her generation, we are here to learn from the life of another women leader in our region who played a significant role in the struggle for independence in South Africa, Mam Albertina Sisulu. She lived through the difficult period in history but remained resilient. Through her own life story, we can learn how we as aspiring public representatives and all of us as women leaders can make a difference in the lives of our nation as she did.

**Never give up your dream**

Mama Sisulu, born in 1918, a time of hopelessness when many people died as a result of influenza, could have wallowed in pain and misery and have no dream for a better tomorrow. The challenge of disease spurned her to become a nursing sister and a caregiver in order to save lives and also look after her family.

As a Women activist, a wife and mother when her husband was arrested detained and finally sent to Robben Island, she could have been broken and decide to quit her fight for liberation. When she too was arrested, detained and served with banning orders that confined her in Soweto, she could have abandon the quest for justice, but it is the resilient of spirit that made her to survive. She saw opportunity where there was none. She used her own qualification to educate others on primary health care. She used her house as an alternative school where she organized classes for alternative education to apartheid. She used her suitcase of primary health care to also include materials for mobilizing Women under the Federation of South African Women.
**Understood the importance of the collective**

During her nursing career she mobilized nurses to protest against carrying passes. A strategy used by the Nursing Council to force women to carry passes and break the fight that women were mounting against the then regime.

In 1954, they with other women activist from the labour movement, churches, professionals and rural women, formed the Federation of South African women and adopted the Women’s Charter which was a template of the South Africa Women wanted.

In the 1992, as a member of the African National Congress Women’s League they formed a coalition of women from various political parties, churches, professionals, workers and rural women to influence the negotiation process towards a democratic South Africa and develop a charter for effective equality.

**Ma Sisulu an Educator**

During the 1980 when political parties were banned or repressed, Ma Sisulu identified and mentored young Women activities to become part of the broader fight against apartheid. She shared her life’s story which told of s story of love, struggle and triumph. Through her story one learned how women can balance their lives as wives and mothers and their lives as activist and freedoms fighter.

She cared about the education of her nation. She appreciated that the then education system in South Africa was not designed to uplift the nation, but was to make African people subservient to their master. She became an Organiser for alternative education and used her own house to conduct classes.

During the 1980s when she was a leader in the United Democratic Movement, she supported the initiatives to resolve the education crisis that gripped our country through organizations National Education Crisis Committee.
Standing on the shoulders of giants

By the time Mama Sisulu and their generation were born, many women like Charlotte Maxeke had been in the forefront of the liberation struggle and the struggle for women’s emancipation. They too learned from the giants.

The first mobilization against the pass laws in 1913 saw Women in the then Orange Free State mobilizing protest against carrying passes. In response the then government arrested the women. After visiting the women in Kronstaad jail, Sol Plaatjies wrote “...they are determined to fight the pass laws no matter where they might be...they are fighting for freedom of women in the Free State...they do not care even if they die in jail.”

It can be argued that the resilience of the women of 1913, became an inspiration to the generation of women of 1956, the generation of Mama Sisulu who faced with the similar challenge, mobilized 20 000 Women to march to the seat of government at The Union building protesting against the pass laws.

Shaped by her conditions

Mama Albertina Sisulu was born during a difficult period in history. Not only in her country which was under colonialism. Globally, influenza had taken many lives of people. Her mother’s health was not so good, and she was sent to stay with her maternal family where she attended primary school.

During that difficult period her leadership qualities emerged not only academically but at home as she had to support her siblings as well as support her sickly mother. This had an impact in her academic work that saw her missed two years of learning. She remained resilient and later proceeded to high School where she continued to show her leadership qualities and saw her being a head girl.

The ability to adapt in ever changing situations

Conscious of her home environment, she took a career in nursing which would have accorded her an opportunity to receive an income while she studied in order to support her family. She cared about the lives of others even at that very age, she remained aware of the challenges
that her society experienced. Through her profession she became a care giver to those who were less privileged.

Her own experience as a nursing sister exposed her to the brutality of the Colonial system and Apartheid System after 1948. She fell in love with an activist, and a freedom fighter Walter Sisulu. Their home became a home for many activists and a place for shaping many political activists’ lives. At the time at which Walter Sisulu became the full time General Secretary of the ANC, she became the breadwinner of the family. She understood that the struggle for justice and peace and the attainment of freedom was more than the comfort of her family, but it was for the entire nation.

**A leader and activist in her own right**

She too, became an activist in her own right and participated in the mobilization of Women towards the formation of the federation of South African women, who in 1954 drafted the charter of women’s rights. In 1956 it was this umbrella organization that mobilized the historic 1956 women’s march against pass laws. Her career was not limited to the halls and wards of hospitals, she extended it homes. She took primary health care and education as the most important elements in the growth of any nation. She would visit Women in their homes carrying her suitcase on her head teaching them about primary health care. The suitcase served dual purpose, in it there were pamphlets of the Federation of South African women.

**The power of mobilization**

Mama SISULU appreciated that in order to change situations for the better, it is important to mobilize and organize. She understood that strategies were critical in championing any cause. She drew from the lived experience of her community and understood the power of Women as communicators and organisers and used that experience to propel women in action. Women every day Organiser the life of their families. She too, during the difficult time had to organize her family life in a way that the repression by the apartheid government does not crush her spirit.

The first Christmas after her husband, Walter Sisulu was arrested, she says “I had nothing to give to my children. I had to close doors and windows to bar the smell of good food from the
neighbours because we had nothing.” Difficult as the situation was she ensured that her children got education in order to become better citizens that will contribute to South Africa’s liberation and development.

She organized Women to change their own situation by participating in the struggle for change. She used her skill to educate women on their health and the health of their families without expecting anything in return. She brought home the relationship between the then political system and the conditions of Women and their lives that were negatively impacted upon.

She took part in the women’s struggles by taking part in the women’s movement and within her own political party. She and those of her generation became a voice of conscience within their organizations and societies. They mobilized Women to take part in defiance campaigns, and joined the underground, and sent Women to join the arms struggle as freedom fighters.

**The road to democracy**

In the early 1980, Ma Sisulu was at the forefront of setting up women’s Organisation under the banner of the United Democratic Front. She identified Women activists a crossed the country and ensured that each of them creates a nucleus through which they can mobilize women in their regions and provinces. This is how organizations such as the Federation of Transvaal Women’s Organisation in the then Transvaal, the Natal Organisation of Women in Natal and the Border Women’s Organisation in the Eastern Cape. This was a stepping stone for he revival of the Federation of South African Women. What was the power of the Federation of South African Women. It was a platform which brought Women from all walks of life through which Women can mobilize to change the system.... the experience of the 50s were still relevant in the 80s.

**The power of being a woman**

In the mid-eighties, the UDF leadership decided that Women must first form the UDF Women’s Congress. This became a sore point for Women another form of struggle, because it diverted them from their objective for the formation. Of Fedsaw, but the strength of being a Women, was to say yes when deeply we were resolved to defy.
**The quota as a mechanism**

In the early 1990s, it became clear that men even from the democratic movement were relegating Women to the back seat. In the talk about talks and the drawing of the negotiating agenda, it was all men not a single woman. It was this realization that Women in the ANC fought within the Organisation for the quota system in the election of leaders within the ANC. In 1991 during the first congress of the ANC, Women pushed for 30 per cent representation in decision making structures of the party. Women were ridiculed and called names, but Women preserved and drew on the strengths of women in society. The ANC Women’s League mobilized women across the political spectrum, class, religion and creed to form the Women National Coalition as a front that Women used to influence the negotiation process and ensured that the Constitution that was drafted is inclusive of women and lay the basis for an equal society.

**Ma Led from the front and from behind**

She was not scared to lead when it was necessary to do so. During the rent boycott in the mid-eighties, she mobilized women to be at the forefront of the struggle against rent boycott. Women and single women were the most affected by the payment of rent because a majority of them were breadwinners and responsible for their families. She formed the street committees.

She led from behind by ensuring that she nurtured and gave space for other women to lead. She identified talent of young women and encouraged them to lead.

**Changing the architecture of the institutions of power**

In 1994 as part of the first cohort of Parliamentarians, they changed the architect of Parliament. In order to ensure that women take care of their children, Parliament had to have a crèche for those who had children. The programming of Parliament had to create space for family time. Parliamentary recess had to coincide with children’s holiday.

**ENDS**