

WE MUST CELEBRATE THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF SOUTH AFRICAN WOMEN

Dear Fellow South African,

Tomorrow we will commemorate the day in 1956 when thousands of women marched on the Union Buildings to protest against apartheid pass laws.

We are all familiar with the iconic image of Rahima Moosa, Lilian Ngoyi, Helen Joseph and Sophie Williams de Bruyn marching defiantly up the stairs of the amphitheatre of the Union Buildings on that historic day.

In their hands were thousands of petitions from women across the country to Prime Minister JG Strijdom. The petition opens with the words: "We are women of every race, we come from the cities and the towns, from the reserves and the villages. We come as women united in our purpose to save the African women from the degradation of passes."

They spoke about the impact these pass laws would have on black women. Families would be broken up and children left uncared for. They spoke of fear of arrest and humiliation and degradation at the hands of policemen. They spoke of losing the fundamental right to move freely from one place to another. They argued that with their movements restricted, they would be unable to earn a decent living, to take up an occupation or to study.

In the South Africa of today, women enjoy the fundamental rights and freedoms that their grandmothers and great-grandmothers were denied.

Today, women can advance in any occupation, study in a place and field of their choice and own businesses. Thanks to employment equity legislation and other policies of the democratic government, women's representation in the workplace, in government and all of society continues to grow.

According to South Africa's most recent review of progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals, we are on an upward trend towards the achievement of gender equality.

There are several areas where the representation of women has been on the rise. In Parliament, 46% of National Assembly members are women. Currently, 62% of the entire public service is female, and 44% of senior management posts are filled by women.

The current administration has accelerated the agenda for advancing women's representation by appointing the first woman to head the National Prosecuting Authority and the first female Directors-General in the State Security Agency and the Presidency.

Last week we appointed the first female Deputy National Commissioner of the South African Police Service, and last month Justice Mandisa Maya was appointed as South Africa's first female Deputy Chief Justice. Out of 256 judges on the Bench, 114 are female and nearly half of all magistrates are female.

Representation of women matters a great deal.

We come from a painful past where young black women and girls had limited prospects. Seeing black women occupy the highest echelons of society as ministers, judges, business leaders, engineers and fighter pilots is an inspiration and an encouragement to the many who hope to follow in their footsteps.

Another area of progress is the right to reproductive health care, which is enshrined in our Constitution. Unlike a number of countries, South African women have access to contraception and safe termination of pregnancy in the public health system.

The democratic state has worked to repeal all laws that discriminate against women, and over the years our courts have ruled against policies and practices that unfairly discriminate against women on the grounds of motherhood, sexual orientation or other factors.

We have laws that protect women against harassment in the workplace and that address modern forms of victimisation of women. Women in traditional communities have rights to own land, to enter into contracts and to inherit.

The prevalence of gender-based violence remains one of our biggest obstacles towards achieving full and meaningful gender equality.

Just as the 1956 Women's March sent a signal that equal rights for women was an important goal of national liberation, ending all forms of violence against women and children is vital to our national progress.

This is not a problem of women, but a problem of men. And it is men who are being called upon to be part of the solution, starting with their own attitudes and conduct.

Even as we work as a collective to rid society of gender-based violence, we should not diminish the progress we have made in building a non-sexist society. We must celebrate the many achievements of women in our country and pay tribute to those who continue to lead the way.

As we work to achieve gender equality in all areas of life, we must acknowledge that we have come a long way. And that we still have much further to go.

With best regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Cyril Ramaphosa". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

