



HAVING THE COURAGE TO CROSS ALL BOUNDARIES IN PURSUIT OF THE REALIZATION OF THE GOALS OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND FREEDOMS, SEEKING LEADERSHIP AND SUSTAINING AGENCY FOR GENDER JUSTICE: WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES AND SACRIFICES

Speech at the launch of Malawi Women's Manifesto, Lilongwe, Malawi,

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Programme Director,

Chairperson of the Women's Assembly,

Honorable ministers, Honourable Speaker, Honourable members of Parliament,

Traditional leaders present today,

Excellencies of the diplomatic corps,

Heads and representatives of international organisations,

Distinguished delegates,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Good morning to you all. I wish to sincerely thank the organisers of this assembly for inviting me to join you today and to be part of the historic launch of the women of Malawi's second election manifesto. I believe this is a very insightful initiative that should be replicated across Africa and the entire globe.

One of the glaring features of political reconstruction and post-colonial reform is the glaring patriarchy that often characterises such processes. When there are conflicts women are displaced, dispossessed and abused. When reconstruction deliberations begin women are left out of the room. It is critical that we change this exclusion of women and that we ensure that all leaders recognise that the voice of women is as important as the votes of women.

The struggle for gender equality, human rights, and universal freedoms, is as old as creation. It has been a long struggle and continues to defy the best organisational efforts of women despite better coordination and enhanced African and global cooperation on our gender equality agenda.

Women need to play a leading role in changing this dynamic and ensure that they are in the rooms in which decisions are made.

The story of a formidable South African woman leader, Charlotte Maxeke starkly illustrates the resolve women need to pursue the task of ensuring access and equality. Some of you may know that Maxeke was the first African woman graduate of South Africa. She studied in the United States of America and absorbed the Pan African philosophies of Marcus Garvey and her mentor the incredible Dr WEB Du Bois. She recognised her own racist colonised South Africa in the experience of Africans in the diaspora and imported these lessons into her leadership as a professional and activist in education, youth development and community upliftment.

Her political awakening coincided with the historic formation of the African National Congress, South Africa's now oldest liberation movement. The ANC was launched as an organisation in 1912 in the city of Bloemfontein in South Africa. Deeply excited at the prospect of an organisation that would advance black liberation, Maxeke decided to attend the meeting as a delegate. The organisers of the event had invited a diverse range of stakeholders, all male. Maxeke was the only female in attendance. The chair of the meeting called the meeting to order and asked that the first item of discussion should be Maxeke continued attendance in the meeting . It is reported that a debate of more than five hours ensued with one of the leaders Reverend Seme arguing for Maxeke to stay. She was not asked to speak and silently followed the debate. Finally reason prevailed and she stayed in the meeting but could not speak and contribute to the debates.

This experience persuaded Maxeke that women need to organise themselves and develop and articulate their own agenda. She was a leading figure in forming the women's league of the African National Congress(ANC) , she played a key role in drafting the content of the women's charter of 1954 and continued the struggle for women's leadership for the rest of her life.

The story illustrates a fact we are all aware of seeking change requires courage and resolve. She would not be bribed with a better position, nor would the promise of a political post persuade her to desert the agenda of gender equality. For thousands of women such as Maxeke , the ANC was their political home for all their lives, and she linked this reality to improved political clarity, activism in community development and an active role in youth advancement.

The lesson is courage and organisation. The struggle for gender equality challenges deeply ingrained societal norms, centuries of empowering men and the rejection of an established myth that men are superior.

The women's manifesto is a critical document because it sets out in clear terms the desired goals of women. Women want to be in Parliament, want to be in cabinet as key ministers, and want to play a role in all sectors of society. I welcome the process of review of the first manifesto and I hope the lessons learned will be used to refresh the new manifesto.

In several of our countries progress has been evident in the pursuit of a gender agenda. In the SADC region we have a minimum of thirty per cent of women in our legislatures, this is good, but it has not translated into a minimum of thirty per cent of women in the cabinets of our countries. Women want more than minister of gender and minister of welfare.

As we stated clearly in the process of developing the Constitution of South Africa, women's rights are human rights, they are not extraneous rights that seek favoured treatment, thus our leaders must be compelled to integrate our proposals and demands into their policy agenda.

I think in South Africa we relied too heavily on the bill of rights of our Constitution and neglected other strategic tools for advancing gender equality. We should have done more to educate the judiciary about inequality and the judicial blindness to abuse of women. We should have been more insistent about a gender budget so that we would be able to assess the degree to which political promise translated to financial allocations for key programmes.

In the economic sectors we permitted the private sector to slow down change while our primary focus was public sector board participation.

On the matter of leadership, we were neglectful of woman leadership and were slow in ensuring a woman president gets support to advance an agenda of transformation.

In education, while girls enjoyed increased opportunity we were careless in not ensuring their access to critical disciplines in science engineering finance and information technology. These are disciplines of the future and women and girls must lead in them.

It is also vital that women in leadership know they have our support and understand our expectations. At times we maroon women in leadership once they assume office and we fail to give them the solid support that can ensure they succeed.

The pursuit of a modern progressive women's agenda is of concern to all women in Africa. We should share the experiences of the women's consortium or assembly throughout Africa and assist all women to develop a vibrant agenda. Your agenda for women is an agenda for all women.

I am thrilled to be part of the launch and I hope that the aspirations in the Manifesto will be embraced by our leaders and will be implemented.

I want to conclude by referring to key rights that I believe are imperatives for women's empowerment. The first is the right to equality, a right we incorporated in our constitution and linked it very clearly to positive discrimination as a means of advancing equality. Second the right to culture religion and language, due to abuse of these rights we must ensure their practice is linked to equality. The right to privacy and free expression are also important for women, we must have control over our bodies and harmful speech that promotes hate must be prohibited.

These illustrate that inequality has many complex dimensions to it and we must be attentive to all these facets. Women must monitor and assess progress on the women's agenda.

Leadership, but you must check that a proper budget is provided that all ministries and departments integrate a gender agenda and that members of Parliament support implementation of the agenda through regular public hearings and reports by the women's caucus on success and failures. Women

must remain constantly mobilised and be very alert to the possibility of reversals if we neglect monitoring and evaluation.

Finally, we are part of the world as women, part of the majority. We are living in a very troubling, toxic geopolitical environment where conflict, exclusion and prejudice are prevalent. Climate change corruption civil war are affecting the progress of women, displacing women increasing food insecurity and retarding progress. As women activists and in leadership we must never be a mere carbon copy of our male leaders we must be bold in asserting a progressive global morality where the rights of all people are respected. The opportunities we want for Malawi matter for women in Palestine, in Israel, in Sudan, in Iran and in Myanmar. Women can bring this difference of peace and security for all of Africa and the globe and through our leadership we will positively contribute to a better world.

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