

Speech by Mme Smangele Nkosi, Spouse of the Ambassador of South Africa to Belgium on the occasion of the International Women's Day - Changing the lives of Women and Children in ACP Countries, 7 May 2014, ACP House, Brussels.

Your Excellency Secretary General of the ACP, Alhaji Muhammad MUMUNI,
Honourable Assistant Secretary General, Madam Michèle Dominique RAYMOND,
Excellencies, Ambassadors,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I feel extremely honoured, indeed privileged to have been invited to share my experiences and thoughts on this auspicious occasion, the anniversary of the International Women's Day.

The United Nations (UN) recognised March 8 as International Women's Day in 1975. The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, adopted by the UN General Assembly in December 1979, was in effect the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Women. Ratified by 179 countries, it established the benchmarks against which the policies of all countries may be assessed.

The Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action, adopted by the landmark Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, took matters further, setting targets that participant countries committed themselves to achieving. Both the Beijing Declaration and the special session are significant landmarks in the struggle for gender equality, identifying the palpable expressions of inequality, and drawing the roadmap for its eradication.

To place the significance of this day in perspective, I believe that it is important that we step back, pause and reflect on the current status of women across the world.

The UNDP reports that "women and girls account for six out of 10 of the world's poorest and two-thirds of the world's illiterate people". Poverty is gendered and most of those caught in its mesh lack the assets to fight their way out of it. It is encouraging to note though that the past decades saw considerable reductions in child mortality worldwide, which is one of the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). ACP countries, however continue to have high rates of child mortality despite intensified

efforts to reduce it. Concerning maternal health findings show there have been increases in the proportion of women receiving prenatal care but much still needs to be improved.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Beijing Platform for Action recognized that social and cultural factors often increase women's vulnerability to HIV and may determine the course that the infection takes in their lives. Recent data show that in Africa and the Middle East, women account for more than half of people living with HIV/AIDS.

With regards to education, there is progress – albeit slow and uneven – in the literacy status of adult women and men around the world. However, reflecting the persistent disadvantages they face, women account for two thirds of the world's 774 million adult illiterates – a proportion that is unchanged over the past two decades. Gender disparities in adult literacy rates remain wide in most regions of the world.

In the workplace, globally, women's participation in the labour market remained steady in the two decades from 1990 to 2010, hovering around 52 per cent. In contrast, global labour force participation rates for men declined steadily over the same period, from 81 to 77 percent. In ACP countries the women participation rate is below 50%. While the gap between participation rates of women and men has narrowed slightly in the last 20 years but remains considerable.

In spite of the changes that have occurred in women's participation in the labour market, women continue to bear most of the responsibilities for the home: caring for children and other dependent household members, preparing meals and doing other housework. In all regions, women spend at least twice as much time as men on unpaid domestic work.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The mission and objectives of the ACP Ambassadors Spouses Association should be viewed against this background. Gone are the days where the Ambassador's spouse is a women only portrayed as a socialite, paying attention to the wining and dining of her husband's guests while he talks politics. In addition to semi-diplomatic duties, Spouses take on charitable work for the benefit of marginalised societies.

Without doubt the biggest challenge in women empowerment and gender equality lies in ACP states, given their levels of socio-economic development. Our Association seeks to support and complement the objectives of the ACP in contributing to promotion of women empowerment and gender equality. In this regard, on an annual basis we identify projects that are geared towards uplifting women and equipping them with skills that help to sustain the livelihoods of their communities. We also support efforts by charity organisations aimed at improving the living condition of the less privileged, while empowering the women livelihood in ACP countries. We are committed to empowering women living in poverty to make major improvements in their lives. We recognise that gender equality and women's empowerment are essential to advancing justice and ending global poverty.

We are specifically dedicated to addressing socio economic issues of women and girls. The Association invests in programs that combine multiple interventions to respond to women's inter-related rights and needs, from physical safety to economic security. In the past 3 years we have contributed more than € 50 000 to 5 projects in ACP countries (Haiti, Sierra Leone, Solomon Islands, Swaziland and Vanuatu). It is our intention to double these efforts in the next three years.

As a result of these projects, we have: contributed in helping widows and children in Swaziland to feed themselves, thereby improving their lives; we have assisted towards the eradication of poverty in the Sierra Leone, through provision of health care and education in poverty stricken areas to young girls and women; we contributed to fighting the scourge of breast cancer (number one killer of women across the world), in two Pacific countries. In the current year we will focus on empowering Women Single Headed homes in Rwanda for promotion of peace and equality we will also support Pan African Women Organisation of Burkina Faso in their endeavour for economic empowerment of rural women.

Last but by no means least, our association intends to develop new and leverage existing partnerships with a view to mobilising further resources to fulfil its mission. In this regard, we plan to develop partnerships with the Belgian government, the European Union, the Diaspora and other organisations domiciled in Belgium to help contribute to changing the lives of women in ACP countries.

Allow me to conclude my statement by thanking the leadership and member states of the ACP for their continued, unremitting support of the programmes and activities of the Spouses

Association. In this regard, I would like to take this opportunity to renew to you an invitation to attend our annual gala dinner that will be held on 30 May 2014. This colourful and glamorous event has over the years grown to become one of the premier events in the Brussels diplomatic and cultural landscape.

We look forward to your patronage of this prestigious event.

I thank you for your attention.