

# **SPEAKER'S NOTES FOR CLR MPHO PARKS TAU, EXECUTIVE MAYOR OF THE CITY OF JOHANNESBURG AT THE CONFERMENT OF FREEDOM OF THE CITY STATUS ON LEADERS OF THE 1956 WOMEN'S MARCH**

15 August 2013

It was a remarkable sight that winter's morning in the amphitheatre in front of the Union Buildings of Pretoria. 20 000 women from across the length and breadth of South Africa; transcending age, race, creed and social status; all united in a common defiance against an oppressive system of government; united as one voice to call for the liberation of our country.

This was the Women's March of 1956 – one of the seminal events in the history of South Africa and one of the watershed moments in the mobilisation of the masses of our country's citizens to demand equality, freedom and fundamental rights in the land of their birth.

Today, more than half a century later, we as the people of Johannesburg – and the descendants of these courageous women – are, once again, gathered to pay our collective tribute to those women who galvanised the struggle.

Through conferring the Freedom of the City, Johannesburg's highest civic accolade, we are honouring more than the 20 000 who participated in the 1956 March. We are, indeed, extending our gratitude and our enduring appreciation to the millions of brave women who preceded them, and followed them – the mothers and daughters, upon whose sacrifices a free South African society was built.

Madam Speaker,

Our distinguished recipient, Auntie Sophie Williams-De Bruyn,

Families and close friends of our other honourees, Lilian Ngoyi, Helen Joseph and Rahima Moosa and veterans who marched in 1956

Previous Freeman of Johannesburg,

Chief Whip of Council: Cllr Prema Naidoo

MECs and Members of the Provincial Legislature

Executive Mayors

Members of the Mayoral Committee

Chair of Chairs

Chairpersons

Councilors

City Manager: Mr Trevor Fowler

Managers and Officials of Council

Business Leaders

Civil Society Organisations

The Media

Distinguished guests

Ladies and gentlemen.

We are delighted to welcome you here at this celebration of the rich and eventful history of our country. We do this in Women's Month – a period set aside by National Government, to reflect on the contribution made by women in the past – but also on their current position in society and the role they will play in future.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This year, the celebration of Women's Month coincides with a broader country-wide centennial reflection on the impact of the 1913 Land Act, a draconian piece of legislation that was designed to deprive African people from land they owned and confined them to what later became known as the "homelands."

Writing in Ilanga newspaper, John Langalibalele Dube, the founding President of the ANC, painted this harrowing picture of the impact the Act had on families who were forcibly removed from land their ancestors have owned for decades:

*"It is only a man with a heart of stone who could hear and see what I hear and see, and remain callous and unmoved. "It would break your hearts did you but know, as I know, the cruel and undeserved afflictions wrought by the hateful enactment on numberless aged, poor and tender children of my race in this their native land."*

The Land Act was one of the first legislative building blocks upon which the apartheid system was built. Through the years, the system was extended to systematically deprive African people from their rights, forcibly removing people from areas such as Sophiatown, introducing the migrant labour system, breaking up families and providing communities with inferior infrastructure, education and health systems.

Women often bore the brunt of the system. They were oppressed at multiple levels; because of their race; because of their class and because of their gender. The extension of the infamous “Pass Laws” to women in the mid-1950, was seen as the ultimate instrument to keep women out of urban areas and thus institutionalise a system of a racial segregation.

But, as in 1913, women again took the initiative to galvanise the resistance against apartheid. There is thus a strong connection between the Land Act and the 1956 March. In fact, the first major collective act of defiance by women, took place in 1913 to protest against the legislation. Charlotte Maxeke, who would later become the galvanising force in the establishment of the ANC Women’s League, was one of the primary leaders of these protest actions.

Women representing different political traditions joined together in 1954 to form the Federation of South African Women – also known as Fedsaw. Among the prime movers behind this, were Helen Joseph and Lilian Ngoyi. They drafted a comprehensive Women’s Charter setting out their demands in great detail and fiercely rejecting each and every aspect of the apartheid system.

Many years later, poet Alice Ntongo wrote a stirring poem which was published in Staffrider Magazine with the title: “Women Arise” linking these two historical events:

***Women of our land arose  
heard call of distant drums  
summoning to unity  
to war oppressive laws***

***1913 call  
vibrated from eardrum to ear  
they arose those warrior-women  
and marched in the Tree State' ...***

***eyes blazing, they hammered forward  
their path, and racists quivered.***

***The women blazed nearer and  
nearer  
forcing the final cowards  
to burn that violent law  
their special restrictive permits of paper  
that arrested human movement.***

***Forty years later  
we were there  
holding the fort ... fiercely again, women  
Lilian and Helen  
who followed Charlotte Maxeke  
leading our women to apex; August fifty-six***

***Women arose  
thoughts bathed in sweat, they marched  
two's and three's of colours  
coming, coming  
torrents of defiance  
to the very contaminated steps of Pretoria's Union Buildings,  
they marched***

***Petitions submitted  
Strydom rewhitened  
looked, then preferred to hide ...  
taught his secretary lies ... 'Out on business!'***

***Bravery kept vigil  
night transforming to triumph  
how did their beings know  
police dogs were watching waiting  
for the slightest move to jump  
against that victory!***

***Mothers can march to battle!  
WOMEN OF AFRICA, ARISE!***

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Conferment of Freedom of the City to exceptional individuals is not a decision that is taken lightly by the City of Johannesburg. In the past 15 years this honour has only been bestowed on five previous occasions, to Tata Walter Sisulu in 1997; Oom Beyers Naude in 2001; Tata Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela in 2004; Uncle Joe Slovo in 2007 and the much-admired, Uncle Kathy (Ahmed Kathrada) in 2012.

Today's ceremony is thus a unique event in our city's short history as a democratic local government. And it is our honour and pleasure to do this in the presence of one of the leaders of the 1956 March, Sophie Williams De Bruyn, families of the other recipients, women leaders from our city in governance, commerce, industry, labour and civil society and so many other citizens from this world-class African city.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I want to go back briefly to that event on the stairs of the Union Buildings, 57 years ago. The social historian, Cheryl Walker, described it in vivid terms:

*“Many of the African women wore traditional dress, others wore the Congress colours, green, black and gold; Indian women were clothed in white saris. Many women had babies on their backs and some domestic workers brought their white employers' children along with them. Throughout the demonstration the huge crowd displayed a discipline and dignity that was deeply impressive.”*

Up the stairs to the office of the Prime Minister walked four women: Rahima Moosa, Lilian Ngoyi, Helen Joseph and Sophie Williams. They carried with them huge bundles of paper; petitions with the signatures of more than 100 000 women gathered across South Africa – in rural villages and townships, on factory floors and lowly office buildings. The collective voices of South Africa's women who declared very boldly in the accompanying Women's Charter:

*“We, the women of South Africa, wives and mothers, working women and housewives, African, Indians, European and Coloured, hereby declare our aim of striving for the removal of all laws, regulations, conventions and customs that discriminate against us as women, and that deprive us in any way of our inherent right to the advantages, responsibilities and opportunities that society offers to any one section of the population.”*

The sight of 20 000 women, united in their demands for justice proved too much for the leaders of the apartheid government cowering in their offices in the Union Building. The most powerful man in the country, Prime Minister J G Strijdom – the “Lion of the North as he was called by his followers -- slipped out of the building through a back alley, too afraid to face the women, as stated in Alice Ntsongo's poem – *Women Arise*:

***Strijdom rewhitened  
looked, then preferred to hide ...  
taught his secretary lies ... 'Out on business!'***

Then, at the suggestion of Lilian Ngoyi, the entire crowd stood in absolute silence for a full 30 minutes before raising their hands in the Congress salute while singing ‘*Nkosi sikeleli Afrika*’.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Many of us have been born after the 1956 March. For many it is hard to imagine what life was like for ordinary black men and women whose entire daily existence was governed by laws and regulations over which they had no say and which was designed to humiliate and marginalise them from the democratic processes.

By honouring these exceptional women who led the 1956 March, we are honouring the contribution made by women over many decades in the struggle for human rights – not only in South Africa, but across the African continent.

We are also celebrating the remarkable gains made by women in all spheres of society since the advent of democracy in 1994. And we are recommitting ourselves to the future to consolidate these gains and remove the remaining obstacles that still exist in society and prevent women from taking their rightful places.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Lilian Ngoyi was the first to be elected Secretary General of the ANC Women's League; the first woman serving on the National Executive of the ANC. Together with Dora Tamana, the first woman to campaign overseas on behalf of the liberation movement and to call for the isolation of the apartheid regime. She was a fiery speaker, condemning apartheid to international audiences in Germany, England, Switzerland, Romania, Russia and China.

No wonder the apartheid government saw in this formidable woman -- who started off as a seamstress in a garment factory -- a dangerous opponent. She was banned in 1962; and again in 1975; placed under house arrest; not allowed to publicly meet with comrades and fellow activists; detained and interrogated numerous times – even in her final years when the strains of her activities took the inevitable toll on her health.

By all accounts, she was an inspiring speaker and a brilliant orator. In an article in Drum magazine, the renowned author, Es'kia Mphahlele wrote of her: "*She can toss an audience on her little finger, get men grunting with shame and a feeling of smallness, and infuse everyone with renewed courage.*"

We honour the courage of Lilian Ngoyi through conferring the Freedom of the City of Johannesburg on her posthumously.

But we are also honouring her in a living way by celebrating the gains our country and our city has made since our democratic transformation in 1994. At a visual level, we see more and more and more women occupying senior and executive positions in government, in administrations, in board rooms and in class rooms.

Ladies and gentlemen,

South Africa can today celebrate remarkable progress made through legislation and measures taken by government to improve the quality of life of women. Since 2008, for instance, we have seen an astonishing 60% reduction in mother-to-child transmission of HIV because of the government's progressive health care programmes.

The country has already reached the objectives set by the Millennium Development Goals to provide universal primary education to all children, thus empowering our younger generation into the future.

We have experienced a steady increase in female enrolment and graduation at institutions of higher learning, especially in the fields of technology, science and engineering. The percentage of female students attending classes in these fields grew from 43% in 2000 to 50% in 2009 and continues to grow.

In Johannesburg, half of the positions on the Mayoral Committee are occupied by women as well as the esteemed position of Speaker of Council. Senior women in management positions, heading key departments and agencies, take decisions on a daily basis involving billions of rands and affecting the everyday lives of all our residents. We, again, salute and recognise them on this important day.

Ladies and gentlemen,

While we celebrate the gains made by women in the public sector – including in Johannesburg, we must express our concerns that this has not yet become too apparent in the all sectors of society where “glass ceilings” still exist to prevent them from reaching their full potential.

The 2013 annual report of the Commission for Employment Equity shows that white males still occupy top management positions and senior levels in the private sector whilst African women, are languishing at the bottom of the scales.

Ladies and gentlemen,

**Rahima Moosa** was born in the Strand, Cape Town on 14 October 1922. She attended Trafalgar High School in Cape Town. As a teenager, Rahima and her identical twin sister, Fatima became politically active after they became aware of the unjust segregationist laws that ruled South Africa. In 1943 Rahima became the shop steward for the Cape Town Food and Canning Workers' Union. She later became the branch secretary for the union and more active in labour politics. In 1951 she married Dr. Hassen “Ike” Mohamed Moosa, a fellow comrade and Treason trialist. She moved to Johannesburg with her husband and together they had four children.

Like many others in the labour movement at the time she was strongly influenced by the late Solly Sachs, a driving force in the SACP and the late father of our esteemed Constitutional Court judge, Albie Sachs.

In Johannesburg, Rahima became involved with the Transvaal Indian Congress and thereafter the African National Congress as the two organisations had signed a pact for a common struggle.

According to historians, she was in the final stages of pregnancy when she was nominated to lead the historic 1956 March. She was nervous about participating and consulted her father in the matter, who advised her: *“Go on the march even if your baby is born on the pavement.”*

In the early 1960s, Rahima became listed, a status that she remained in until 1990 with the unbanning of the African National Congress. In 1970 she suffered a heart attack, as a result of diabetes and after this her health deteriorated drastically until her death in 1993, a year before independence.

The social historian, Prof Fatima Meer, paid tribute to her in the following way:

*“The essential meaning of Rahima Moosa is that one does not need outstanding education or high status to become a leader. She embellished the chronicles of South African history and contributed magnificently to liberation of the country.”*

Ladies and gentlemen,

**Helen Joseph** was born in Sussex, England and graduated with a degree in English from the University of London in 1927. She then taught for three years in India, before coming to Durban in 1930 where she met and married dentist Billie Joseph.

After the war she took a job with the Garment Workers Union (GWU) and was a founder member of the African National Congress' white ally, the Congress of Democrats (COD), and national secretary of Federation of South African Women.

In 1955, she was one of the leaders who read out the clauses of the Freedom Charter at the Congress of the People. The Women's March on 9 August 1956 was one of the most memorable moments of her illustrious political career, as she was one of the main organisers of the protest.

A memorable clause from the Freedom Charter is perhaps most applicable when reflecting on the life of Helen Joseph:

*"These Freedoms we will fight for, side by side, throughout our lives, until we have won our liberty"*



She was arrested on a charge of high treason in December 1956, and banned in 1957. Her entire life became a long saga of police persecution. She was the first person to be placed under house arrest in 1962, and she survived several assassination attempts, including bullets shot through her bedroom window late at night and a bomb wired to her front gate.

Joseph was diagnosed with cancer in 1971, and her banning orders were lifted for a short time before being reinstated for two years in 1980. Joseph passed away on 25 December 1992 in Johannesburg.

Helen Joseph was awarded the ANC's highest award, the Isithwalandwe/Seaparankoe Medal for her devotion to the liberation struggle as a symbol of defiance, integrity and courage.

Speaking at her funeral in 1992 her long-time friend and fellow treason trialist, President Nelson Mandela, said the following:

*“Helen challenged the paternalism of our society and left a legacy that the struggle for the emancipation of women had to be side by side with the struggle to liberate the people of South Africa. She believed that the two processes were inseparable.”*

Ladies and gentlemen,

We are delighted to have the fourth recipient of the Freedom of the City, Auntie Sophie Williams-De Bruyn with us today. She was born in Villageboard, in the Eastern Cape and attended primary and secondary schools in Port Elizabeth.

She started working in the textile industry during school vacations and was quickly recognised for her leadership qualities. Later, she became a shop steward, and increased her involvement in representing and articulating the grievances of the workers. At the Textile factory she rose to become an executive member of the Textile Workers Union in Port Elizabeth working alongside people like Raymond Mhlaba, Vuyisile Mini, and Govan Mbeki. .

She became the founder member of the South African Congress of Trade Union (SACTU), which is the predecessor of COSATU. Her trade union work interacted with mainstream political movements of the day, such as the ANC and the Congress alliance.

In 1955 she was appointed as a full-time organiser of the ‘Coloured People’s Congress’ in Johannesburg. The African National Congress and the Transvaal Indian Congress had offices in the basement of the Market Theatre and they gave the Coloured People Congress office space in the same basement.

She led the Women's March to the Union Buildings in 1956 and is the only surviving leader of this historical event.

Her leadership role in the ANC and community structures continued and after 1994 she was elected as a Member of the Gauteng Provincial Legislature, including to the position of Deputy Speaker. She currently serves as a commissioner at the Commission for Gender Equality and is on the National Executive Committee of the ANC Women's League.

Ladies and gentlemen,

What is not often mentioned is that Sophie Williams was a mere 19 years old when she led the 20 000 women into the citadel of apartheid power. Like the rest of the participants she displayed exceptional courage and her actions, to this day, serve as a great example to the younger generation of 2013.

Events like these are not only designed to honour the heroic leaders of the past; but also to inspire and encourage the generation of the present.

There are still many challenges awaiting our country and our city as we sweep away the legacy of three and a half centuries of discrimination and deprivation. I believe that the most effective way in which we can honour the memory of our recipients is to recommit ourselves to the future.

We are committed to pursue the objectives these gallant heroines stood for. In the State of the City Address we defined the following five rights as key to our transformation agenda.

These are:

- 1. The Right to Developmental Service Delivery-** where the city maintains and improves existing infrastructure, while expanding new infrastructure. Where citizens have the right to hold us accountable and become active participants in the delivery of services.
- 2. The Right to a spatially integrated and a united City-** in which we rebuild and reconnect the divisions created by decades of Apartheid spatial planning.
- 3. The Right to a Liveable city –** where all people have access to good quality of life, clean air, food, safety and cultural expression. Earlier this year, I announced the development of Corridors of Freedom, based on transit-oriented growth. While these corridors will provide new momentum to the overall growth of the City's economy, it will also result in the greater empowerment of women; greater access to economic opportunities; supporting stronger family and community life; and increased safety on public transport and in public spaces.
- 4. The right to inclusive economic growth-** to ensure that citizens are active participants in creating their own economic opportunities and shaping their destiny.

- 5. The Right to remake ourselves in this city-** based on our understanding that the citizens of Johannesburg engage not only on the basis of their needs but also on the basis of their capabilities.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The struggle for the liberation of women from the bondages of triple oppression is far from over. We call upon society to join us in the march to intensify the struggle. We urge especially our young people – to become involved in civil society and progressive organisations. There are so many initiatives from national and provincial government and from the City of Johannesburg in which you can become involve. There are programmes aimed at maternal health, caring for the elderly, early-childhood development, community safety, looking after the interests of child-headed households – and many more.

I thank you.

**Ends**