

Address at the opening ceremony of the 16 days of activism campaign

Motherwell, 25 November 2004

Programme Directors,
Premier Nosimo Balindlela,
Honourable Ministers and Deputy Ministers,
Executive Mayor, Nceba Faku,
Standard Bank Chief Executive Officer, Jacko Maree,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and gentlemen:

South Africans from all walks of life will remember that, at this time every year, we unite as a nation to observe the 16 Days of Activism on No Violence Against Women and Children.

This is in support of the national cause to unite in the fight against violence and abuse of our women and children. We use this occasion to renew our commitment to end brutal and dehumanising behaviour by some in our society. We use this period to recommit our country to the inalienable human rights of women and children.

I am certain that we all agree that it is fitting that we dedicate this campaign this year to one of our fearless fighters for freedom, for the rights of workers, of women and children, the late Chairperson of the National Council of Provinces, comrade Joyce Kgoali, who passed away last Sunday.

Her untimely loss has deprived us of a militant fighter for the better life for all our people that would also mean safety, security and happiness of the women and children of our country. We owe it to her to intensify the struggle she waged, so that we achieve the objective of no violence against women and children.

As we launch the 16 Days of Activism here today, we need to remind ourselves that the promotion and protection of human rights is an important and integral part of our programme for reconstruction and development.

Because women's and children's rights are human rights, it is therefore important to ensure the continued centrality of women and children in sustainable development strategies and programmes through which we are working for a better life for all.

The connection between crime and poverty is well established. But more significant perhaps, although less often mentioned, is the connection between poverty and vulnerability to crime. Poor women and children are more likely to be victimised because they enjoy fewer protections, less privacy and fewer resources.

Similarly, their resilience in the face of victimisation is considerably less and they are less likely to get the necessary assistance to overcome it.

All of us must take this matter very seriously that the reality we face is that women and children living in conditions of poverty and deprivation are most exposed to all forms of abuse.

To make a real difference in the campaign to reduce the incidence of violence against women and children we must work simultaneously to improve the material lives of our people, while working in these communities to convince them that they too must join the struggle to end violence against women and children.

In this regard, we must engage in the kind of popular mobilisation we undertook during the struggle against apartheid, reaching the people directly and showing them that freedom from apartheid must also mean the freedom of women and children from violence and abuse.

Accordingly, interventions such as those that provide protections for children and the many care-givers who sustain them are not only fundamental to our society - these interventions are indispensable to the long-term development of the people of this country.

At the level of government, the importance of integrated work is most clearly demonstrated, among others, in the workings of the Sexual Offences Courts.

In this regard, The Departments of Justice and Constitutional Development, Social Development, Safety and Security and Health have developed a National Strategy to ensure that government resources are utilised in an integrated manner to ensure effective outcomes. Central to this, is clearly the work done by both the SAPS and the National Prosecuting Authority.

Despite everything we have done, many in our society continue to experience domestic violence with a long-term negative impact on women and children. It is therefore noteworthy that we have experienced an overwhelmingly positive response to the Domestic Violence Legislation, indicating that this intervention was long overdue.

As with the Sexual Offences Courts, we will continue with the important work of training officials in the criminal justice system so as to better deal with issues of domestic violence.

However, the experiences of women, in this country and globally, continue to demonstrate, more than ever, that government intervention alone is not enough to reduce the levels of violence against women and children.

Civil society must join this important campaign on a continuous and sustained basis. I refer here to all the organisations and institutions that regularly interact with large numbers of our people. These include political organisations, the religious communities, sports organisations, civic associations, women's and youth organisations, and others.

I am confident that the 16 Days of Activism will create greater awareness about the many forms of woman and child abuse, but more important, it must increase the mobilisation of entire communities to continue to fight gender-based and child-directed violence and marginalisation.

During the 16 Days of Activism, NGOs, the private sector, faith-based organisations, government, state enterprises and other role-players will band together to encourage a greater awareness of the many forms of woman and child abuse that continue to taint our democracy.

Indeed, the 16 Days of Activism is a time for people to come together and focus on a common problem, regardless of political persuasion, religious affiliation or cultural background. The problem of woman and child abuse, after all, transcends politics, religion, culture and all and any differences that may exist in our society.

Some among our people believe that offenders have more rights than victims. We constantly hear disparaging and resentful comments about how the Constitution affords offenders greater protection than it does the victims of crime. As we know, this is a misrepresentation and is indicative, rather, of a society still coming to grips with the principle of human rights for all. In fact, the social justice imperatives of our Constitution presuppose a victim-centred approach to legal and court processes.

At same time, we are happy that the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development is close to finalising the Victim Charter. Its implementation is expected to give additional support to victims of crime and reduce the secondary victimisation that is frequently experienced, especially by women and children, which often leads to withdrawal of charges.

But in addition to this, as communities we need to create widespread awareness of how complicity with crime and criminal behaviour promotes crime. We must hold a mirror to the face of our society and demonstrate the cost of sustaining the market for stolen goods; of protecting and harbouring criminals and of colluding with abusive attitudes towards women and children.

Clearly, if we are to defeat crime we must educate ourselves about our role in helping to stop corruption that steals from all of us and destroys the moral fabric of our society. We must ensure that every South African makes an informed choice whether they are prepared to be part of criminal!n and defeat of crime.

As we all know, multitudes of South African women and children are wholly or partially dependent on maintenance payments for their livelihood. In this regard, defaulting maintenance payers are the cause of untold misery and degradation to the children of this country.

Clearly, defaulters who have the means to pay and choose instead to ignore their responsibilities as parents must be brought to book. We trust that the employment of Maintenance Investigators combined with recent drive by the National Prosecuting Authority to improve maintenance service delivery will help to ensure parental accountability.

As we are aware, South Africa has acceded to various international conventions, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the African Children's Charter and the Hague Convention on Inter-country Adoptions. In this regard, as government, we continue to update our laws so as to conform to our own constitutional prescriptions and international conventions.

The Department of Correctional Services (DCS) has been tasked, by government, to co-ordinate the national campaign.

The success of the previous campaigns has been attributed to the formation of strategic partnerships between government, civil society, business and a variety of other sectoral partners - all united by a common cause: to eradicate the abuse of women and children.

And this year, as more of our social partners participate in the campaign, its impact and reach should broaden and expand.

Over the past three months the Office on the Status of Women (OSW), the Office on the Status of the Child (OSC) and the Office on the Status of Disabled Persons (OSDP) - all units within the Presidency - have been working with the Department of Correctional Services, the Government Communication and Information System (GCIS) and other sectoral partners to develop a national calendar of events that we hope will help further to mobilise all South Africans to stand together to ensure that all the women and children of our country fully enjoy equality, dignity, justice, freedom and human rights.

We need to make each one of us understand that human development and especially the development of women and children is in the best interests of all - men and women alike.

Together we can and must defeat the demon of woman and child abuse. This we will do, if we stand together and work together, not pointing fingers at one another.

I thank you.

