



**DEPUTY MINISTER IN THE PRESIDENCY
FOR WOMEN, YOUTH AND PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES**

REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

BY

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AT THE

**FRAY MEDIA AND GCIS RISE AND SHINE BREAKFAST:
WOMEN, GOVERNANCE AND MEDIA INNOVATION
*“EMPOWERED WOMEN EMPOWER THE NATION”***

ON

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[CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY]

Programme Director, Ms Charmeela Bhagowat;
Ms Tshegofatso Modubu, Director: Media Engagement at the
Government Communication and Information System;
The leadership of the fraymedia Foundation;
Women founders and entrepreneurs;
Media professionals and content creators;
Leaders from government, technology and civil society;
Distinguished guests;
Colleagues and friends,

Good morning.

Mama Charlotte Maxeke left us an instruction that remains radical more than a century later. She said: “***This work is not for yourselves - kill that spirit of self, and do not live above your people, but live with them. If you can rise, bring someone with you.***”

There is a theory of women’s empowerment in those words. Empowerment is not the private escape of a few exceptional women from a structure that continues to oppress millions. It is the collective redesign of that structure, so the next woman does not have to survive the same violence, exclusion and exhaustion.

That is why this Rise and Shine Breakfast matters. It gathers women who help society understand itself. Women in media decide which experiences enter public memory, whose pain is believed and which possibilities become imaginable. In a time of disinformation and democratic fatigue, that is democratic infrastructure.

The theme before us declares that empowered women empower the nation. We should welcome it, but also interrogate it. Is an empowered woman simply visible, or does she possess power? Does she have a title but no budget, a platform but no protection, or a business without access to capital and procurement? Is she praised as resilient because the country has normalised her exhaustion?

Empowerment must mean the real freedom to command one's time, body, labour, income, safety and voice. Anything less risks turning a revolutionary demand into a motivational slogan.

This year gives us a powerful measure. South Africa stands before three jubilees: 70 years since the women's march of 1956, 50 years since the Soweto uprising of 1976, and 30 years since the Constitution of 1996. They are three clocks of freedom ticking inside the same unfinished democratic project.

The first clock asks whether the women who marched against passes would recognise economic freedom in the lives of their granddaughters. The second asks whether the courage of the youth of 1976 has become education, work and participation for young women today. The third asks whether the Constitution's promise of dignity, equality and non-sexism has moved from text into the ordinary architecture of daily life.

We must resist two dishonest temptations. The first is to pretend that democracy has delivered nothing. The second is to pretend that what it has delivered is enough.

Democracy fundamentally altered the legal and political status of women. Our Constitution made equality and non-sexism founding values. Democratic South Africa expanded reproductive freedom, strengthened protection against domestic and sexual violence, recognised women in customary marriages and advanced equality in employment. Women's representation in Parliament rose from 33% in 2004 to 42.8% in 2024. In the National Council of Provinces it reached 44.4%, while women's representation in senior public-service management rose to 45.2% in 2023. More tertiary-qualified women also entered physical, mathematical and engineering fields.

These are not cosmetic gains. They have changed who makes law, interprets policy and leads institutions. We dishonour the women who fought for them when we erase progress through fashionable cynicism.

Yet progress at the centre coexists with exclusion at the margins. Women's labour-force participation remains almost 10 percentage points below that of men. Women are still more likely to be unemployed, concentrated in informal work and running smaller enterprises. We remain underrepresented in municipal leadership and in the commanding heights of the private economy.

Within the major news brands studied by the Reuters Institute, women held 38% of top editorial roles in South Africa in 2025 - a reminder that entry into journalism has not automatically translated into control over editorial resources and institutional power.

No honest account of progress can ignore gender-based violence and femicide. A woman cannot be described as empowered if the route to

work is unsafe, if the workplace disciplines her for surviving abuse, if digital platforms turn her body into a site of attack, or if the justice system makes dignity expensive and delay normal.

We must recognise women in their full diversity: Black women and women of colour; rural, township and working-class women; young and older women; women with disabilities; migrant and refugee women; domestic and care workers; women living with HIV; lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex women; mothers and women who are not mothers; women in formal newsrooms and women building platforms from a phone and an unstable data connection.

Our Constitution is itself an intersectional document, born where race, gender, class, disability, sexuality, age and geography meet. An agenda that sees only the woman closest to power will reproduce hierarchy. This is particularly important when we speak about the care economy.

Every morning, before the formal economy reports for duty, another economy is already at work. Children are fed. Older persons are assisted. Medication is administered, water fetched and households organised so that workers can arrive at offices, factories, schools, clinics and newsrooms.

This labour holds society together, yet much of it is unpaid, underpaid or invisible. South African women spend more than twice as much time as men on unpaid domestic work and nearly seven times as much on unpaid care work. We call women “providers” and “the backbone of the family”, but romantic language can conceal an economic injustice. The nation is subsidised by women’s time.

Care is not a private inconvenience to be solved by individual women. It is economic infrastructure. When care systems fail, women leave jobs, decline assignments, postpone education and lose income. A late editorial meeting assumes that someone else is collecting the child. A newsroom that celebrates a woman's leadership while ignoring her care burden has recognised talent but not reorganised power.

International practice offers a useful lesson. Uruguay built a National Integrated Care System that treats care as a right and a shared responsibility. Its time-use data estimates unpaid care work at nearly a quarter of national output, with women contributing more than twice men's share. Canada's investment in affordable childcare has reduced costs while growing the care workforce. South Africa should not copy mechanically. The lesson is that care becomes transformable when it is measured, funded and governed.

We need a South African care compact built on five commitments: recognise care, reduce its labour, redistribute it across women, men, the state and the market, reward paid care workers with decent conditions, and represent care workers in decisions that affect them. That means accessible early childhood development, support for older persons and persons with disabilities, reliable water and transport, social protection, parental leave that changes men's behaviour, and gender-responsive budgets that reveal who benefits and who carries the cost.

Media organisations, technology companies and civil society must also examine themselves. Flexible work cannot mean permanent availability.

Safety policies must address fieldwork and online abuse. Leadership pipelines must not be designed around an unencumbered male worker.

This brings me to the anti-gender movement, because it is impossible to discuss women, media and democracy today without naming the organised backlash against equality.

The anti-gender movement is not simply a collection of conservative opinions. It is an adaptive, transnational political infrastructure. It uses money, lawfare, lobbying, religious distortion, algorithms and disinformation to convert prejudice into policy. It keeps the language of rights while emptying rights of meaning. Equality becomes a threat, bodily autonomy becomes disorder, and transgender people become a fabricated emergency. Feminists, human rights defenders and journalists are cast as enemies of culture, family and nation.

We should refuse that false choice. We are not anti-family; we oppose families organised through violence and silence. We are not anti-culture; living cultures grow through dignity. African women have resisted domination, built economies, led communities and produced knowledge throughout our history.

The backlash has a deliberate media strategy. It understands that if you can discredit the messenger, you can avoid answering the truth. Women journalists are targeted not only for what they report, but for being women in public. UNESCO reported in 2026 that 45% of surveyed women journalists and media workers had self-censored on social media because of online violence, while a quarter reported anxiety or depression linked to that abuse. Artificial intelligence is intensifying

sexualised deepfakes, impersonation and coordinated harassment. For Black, queer, disabled and migrant women, these attacks accumulate rather than arrive separately.

We must also confront the forms of workplace harassment that are disguised as humour, familiarity or supposedly harmless comments. A remark about a woman's health, body, clothing, voice, sexuality, marital status, motherhood or ambition is dismissed as "just a joke", and she is expected to laugh along or risk being labelled difficult, humourless or overly sensitive.

We must be clear, there is no derogatory joke that is harmless. Humour does not neutralise humiliation. It teaches the room that a woman's dignity is negotiable, that her authority can be reduced to her appearance, and that her belonging depends on her willingness to tolerate contempt.

Over time, these so-called small comments silence contributions, corrode confidence, shape decisions about promotion and teach younger women that equality comes with conditions. Workplace harassment is not only the dramatic incident that reaches a disciplinary hearing. It is also the daily erosion of women's standing through innuendo, ridicule, sexualised commentary and exclusion. A workplace committed to equality must interrupt this conduct immediately, rather than asking women to carry it quietly.

Women's safety cannot be left to individual resilience. Telling a woman to grow a thicker skin is not a policy. Platforms need rapid, locally accessible remedies. Newsrooms must offer digital-security,

psychosocial and legal support. Law enforcement must understand technology-facilitated gender-based violence. Civil society and government must confront gendered disinformation before falsehood hardens into common sense.

We also need an information-justice compact. The Competition Commission has affirmed that news media are a public good because they enable citizens to exercise rights and hold power to account. Its final inquiry found that smaller, community and vernacular media face structural disadvantage online. When a community newsroom closes, democracy loses a witness.

Government must therefore support media without scripting media. Public communication procurement should be transparent, fair and accessible to community, independent and women-owned media enterprises. Payment must be prompt. Public data should be open, usable and available in our languages. Support for digital transformation, audience development and organisational resilience should operate through clear criteria and strong editorial firewalls. No journalist should have to exchange independence for survival.

The media sector must move beyond counting women to sharing power. Who owns the platform? Who controls the budget? Who commissions the investigation? Who benefits from the intellectual property? Who is promoted after carrying the invisible labour of mentoring and workplace care? Representation without ownership can become inequality in a more diverse photograph.

There are models from which to learn. India's Khabar Lahariya demonstrates how rural women, reporting in local languages and rooted in community trust, can build journalism with national and global reach. Here at home, Bhekisisa has shown how specialised public-interest journalism can combine rigorous evidence, syndication, newsletters, convening and training. These examples remind us that sustainability does not come from chasing virality alone. It grows from trust, utility, community, multiple revenue streams and the courage to know one's public.

So the task before us is radical, but it is practical.

We must build a care economy that returns time and choice to women. We must build an information economy in which women own institutions, shape technology and receive a fair share of public and commercial value. And we must build a democratic defence against the anti-gender movement - one that is organised, evidence-led, intergenerational and unapologetically intersectional.

The women of 1956 teach us that injustice retreats when women organise. The youth of 1976 teach us that domination fears a generation that can name its condition. The Constitution of 1996 teaches us that freedom must be institutionalised if it is to survive beyond the moment of victory.

These three jubilees therefore ask one question of us: what will our generation add to the inheritance?

Let it be said that we refused to praise women for carrying a nation that would not share the load. Let it be said that we defended truth when organised falsehood tried to silence women. Let it be said that we moved from visibility to ownership, from representation to redistribution, and from policy promise to lived freedom.

And let us return to Mama Charlotte Maxeke's instruction as I prepare to take leave of the platform when she said, and I quote: ***"If you can rise, bring someone with you."***

May every woman who rises in media bring with her a younger woman seeking a first opportunity, a rural storyteller whose language is ignored, a woman with a disability whose insight is excluded, a queer woman targeted for telling the truth, a care worker whose labour makes every other profession possible, and a community whose story has never been treated as national news.

Then our rising will not be individual. It will be structural. It will be democratic. It will be freedom.

I thank you.