Remarks by Minister Nathi Mthethwa at the 5th Mbokodo Awards, Johannesburg

Programme Director
Minister Susan Shabangu
Representative of UNICEF, Mr Herve Ludovic de Lys
Prof Pitika Ntuli
Ms Carol Bouwer
Distinguished Diplomats
Honoured Artists
Ladies and Gentlemen:

As we mark the 5th edition of the Mbokodo Awards, we do so with great pride and anticipation – we are proud that these awards for Women in the Arts have come so far and reached their 5th milestone. We are also in a state of anticipation as we look forward to the announcement of the winners of this year’s awards.

In both instances, what we experience tonight is the result of individual artistic journeys.

For the women in the arts, whom we honour tonight, have progressed from that first creative light that inspired them to becoming artists of note.

They are known in their own communities, recognized in their own arts disciplines and making strides on the African continent and in the wider world.

In the words of Thomas Sankara, the revolutionary leader of Burkina Faso:

“The revolution and women’s liberation go together. We do not talk of women’s emancipation as an act of charity or out of a surge of human compassion. It is a basic necessity for the revolution to triumph.”

This has been the year in which we have commemorated another great collective journey, the 60th anniversary of the historic march of twenty thousand women to the Union Buildings on 9 August 1956.

From all walks of life, from all colours and all cultures, women came from different parts of South Africa. They organized themselves and gathered against all odds, demanding an end to the pass system, demanding equality for all and the emancipation of women.

History tells us that their march was not the start of the Women’s Movement in South Africa, but that as early as 1898 women in Waaihoek in the then Orange Free State drew up a petition to President Marthinus Theunis Steyn protesting against being made to carry passes.

From May to July 1913 women in the Free State continued to protest and march against pass laws.
One of the organisers of this march, Charlotte Makgomo Manye Maxeke, in 1918 would form the Bantu Women’s League that by the 1940s had laid the foundation for the Women’s League of the African National Congress.

They in turn laid the basis for the Women’s Charter and the Freedom Charter and shaped the non-sexism and non-racialism that we have embraced throughout the liberation struggle and in the democratic era.

The rights to equality, to freedom of expression and creativity, are further enshrined in our Constitution that celebrates its 20th anniversary on Saturday 10 December. I am reminded of the words of African-American poet, June Jordan, who gave us one of the most important lines of our generation in a poem she wrote about the Women’s March. And I quote from sections of the poem:

“Poem for South African Women
Our own shadows disappear as the feet of thousands
- by the tens of thousands - pound the fallow land
into new dust that
rising like a marvelous pollen will be fertile….

The whispers too they
intimate to the inmost ear of every spirit….

sound a certainly unbounded heat
from a baptismal smoke where yes
there will be fire

And the babies cease alarm as mothers
raising arms
and heart high as the stars so far unseen
nevertheless hurl into the universe
a moving force
irreversible as light years
traveling to the open
eye
And who will join this standing up
and the ones who stood without sweet company
will sing and sing
back into the mountains and
if necessary
even under the sea

we are the ones we have been waiting for"

Today as we celebrate the remarkable artistic achievements of many generations of South African women, indeed we too say that creative women have acted true to the dictum that: We are the ones we have been waiting for. We also concur: that inspirational and activist women are in the words of June Jordan “a moving force, irreversible as light years traveling to the open eye.”

We salute all those women whose daily resistance and daily efforts to build their lives reminds us that ‘Wathint’ Abafazi, Wathint’ Imbokodo’ (you strike the women, you strike the rock).
These words from the famous resistance song symbolised the courage and strength expressed at the Women’s March of 1956 and also continues to represent the courage of women in their daily lives.

We are reminded of the important rallying cry of the campaign on “16 Days of Activism for No Violence against Women and Children” that calls on everyone to “Count Me In: Together Moving a Non-Violent South Africa Forward”.
Today we also sing the praises of women of courage and women of culture, of the living legends of our times, the upcoming youth and we celebrate the wonderful promise and contribution of the girl child.

This has been a year in which racism has reared its ugly head and in which people have come together to fight this scourge and intensify the building of a non-racial and non-sexist, democratic South Africa.

It has also been the year of girl children asserting their cultural identity and creating spaces where all of us are truly at home; and we salute their efforts.

We furthermore congratulate UNICEF for its sterling work as it marks its 70th anniversary and continues to take strides in protecting and asserting the rights of the child. Above all, it is this fearlessness of women and girl children that we celebrate as each woman recognized today has had to overcome great obstacles in reaching for her dreams.

We salute the nominees and congratulate the winners as they have all achieved greatness and are all truly winners.

May you all go from strength to strength and continue through your art to tell the great South African story and the great women’s story.
It is therefore fitting that we recognize the contribution of our unsung heroines so that your names are known and your contribution acknowledged.

You have named this world for us, given us hope and positive values and are supporting others to develop their talents.

You have imparted to others through your work, that beyond any reasonable doubt, we are the ones we are waiting for!

I than you.

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