

## **KwaZulu Nata Legislature host a Womens Parliament at Greater Kokstad Municipality**

In one of the largest demonstrations staged in this country's history, 20 000 women of all races marched to the Union Building in Pretoria on 9 August 1956, to present a petition against the carrying of passes by women to the Prime Minister, J G Strijdom.

This was the famous **Women's March** which is celebrated as Women's Day on 9 August every year. The march against the pass laws was organized by the **Federation of South African Women (FSAW or FEDSAW)**. The Federation famously challenged the idea that a woman's place is in the kitchen, declaring it instead to be “everywhere”. Although Prime Minister J G Strijdom was not at the Union Building to accept the petition, the women of South Africa sent a public message that they would not be intimidated and silenced by unjust laws. After the petition was handed over to the secretary of the Prime Minister, the women sang a freedom song: “*Wathint' abafazi, Strijdom! Wathintimbokodo.*”

Since then, the phrase “*wathint' abafazi, wathint' imbokodo*” (“You Strike a Woman, You Strike a Rock”) has come to represent the courage and strength of South African women. As a group that has been marginalized, they rose to question the barrier and fought for their emancipation and that of their families. The first National Women's Day was celebrated in 1995 and since then annual celebrations take place throughout the country.

As a result the KZN Legislature, under the leadership of Mtholethi Mthimkhulu (Deputy Speaker of the KZN Legislature), hosted a sectoral Women's Parliament on 7 and 8 August 2011 at Greater Kokstad Municipality in the Sisonke District. This successful event is part of the way to ensure public participation in government activities as provided in section 118 of our Constitution and it also creates a platform for women to raise issues affecting them. A number of presentations were made from various sectors of expertise in order to educate and empower the women of KwaZulu-Natal.

On the first day of the Women's Parliament all Members of the Executive Council (MECs) gave answers to questions that had been raised at the previous 2010 Women's Parliament and highlighted how far they have gone in addressing challenges raised by women. Each MEC was expected to brief the House on their departmental programmes that are aimed at empowering women and at addressing challenges that are faced by the women of this province. Mtholephi Mthimkhulu made his opening remarks in remembrance of those heroines who triggered this freedom, with the likes of Lilian Ngoyi, Fatima Miya, Dorothy Nyembe, Helen Suzman and many more women who led a march to the Union Building in 1956 to protest against the carrying of passes. Furthermore he apprised the House of how much this government has achieved in uplifting and empowering women. He commended

this government led by Dr Zweli Mkhize (the Premier of KwaZulu-Natal) for achieving a 50/50 gender balance in his Cabinet; nevertheless, he confessed that there is still a lot to be done in addressing the issue of gender equity.

Mthimkhulu also appealed to women to take initiative and be part of government programmes, to form co-operatives and become entrepreneurs. “We are urging women to set up co-operatives and take advantage of opportunities that are created by the developmental projects of this government. This government has created programmes, such as the National Gender Policy Framework (NGPF), which is designed to enhance the role of women as equal partners in the economic, social, and cultural development of society, as well as ending the economic marginalization of women in the country,” said Mtholephi.

He further explained that this government wants to strengthen its effort because, as reported in the 55th Session of the United Nations’ Commission on the Status of Women during March this year, many – including here in South Africa – remain in the feminized sectors of the economy with a significant wage gap. He also urged members to donate whatever they can donate in assisting the vulnerable community of Somalia. “As the Office of the Speaker of the KwaZulu-Natal Legislature we would like to appeal to all Members of the Provincial Legislature, the business community, non-governmental organizations and ordinary citizens to donate whatever they can which could be used to help the people of Somalia who are going through this catastrophic disaster. Any donation, mostly of non-perishable goods, can be left at the Speaker’s Office and we will inform you in due course when it will be sent to the needy people of Somalia,” said Mtholephi.

On the second day of this historical event, a parliamentary sitting took place where all MPLs of the day delegated by different political parties seated in the KZN Legislature debated on the theme: “Working together to enhance women’s economic empowerment through skills development and sustainable job creation” after which resolutions were taken. Later on the Live on Air debate was conducted and hosted by Ukhozi FM in order for members to give a report of all the proceedings and also to further advance the debate aligned with the above-mentioned theme.

One can conclude with the wise words of Dr Nelson Mandela where he said, *“Freedom cannot be achieved unless women have been emancipated from all forms of oppression.”* (Former President Nelson Mandela during the opening of South Africa’s first democratically elected parliament on 24 May 1994.)