

**Remarks by H. E. Sibongiseni Dlamini-Mntambo at the River Ward
Women's Day Speaker Series, Ottawa, 6 March 2019.**

Deputy Mayor Dudas,
Councillor Brockington,
Fellow speakers here this evening,
Special guests,
Ladies and gentlemen!

Good evening, Sanibonani, Gooienaand, Bonsoir.

Thank you Councillor Brockington for arranging such an inspiring event. Thank you Deputy Mayor Dudas for welcoming us so warmly.

I have been asked to share some personal experiences this evening. This is possibly the most difficult task I have had since arriving in Ottawa nearly two years ago. You see, ladies and gentlemen, as a diplomat I have learned that the words "In my opinion" are not to be used. As diplomats, we speak for our country. Not for ourselves. But tonight, I will try to remember who I am. As requested – I will share a few personal experiences and thoughts.

I realise that – as unique as every person is – my story is a mere microcosm of apartheid South Africa. I will start with some

reflections from my childhood and then touch on how South Africa's history shaped my experiences.

CHILDHOOD

Let me get the ugliest, most personal, element of my story out of the way: my father abandoned my mother and I when I was three days old. My mother had no option but to leave me with relatives while she sought a livelihood. As a child, I remember being moved from one relative to another. I was grateful that I had a roof over my head. But, sadly, with my mother away there was little in the way of affection or welcoming at these houses.

I had one thing to look forward to, though: once per month, my mother would visit. That is, if she managed to save enough to do so. She was my rock during those days. (She still is!) A selfless, dedicated woman who made incredible sacrifices to provide for me.

Although my enrolment was late, I eventually started school.

Somehow I developed a love for books. I guess, if I am honest, it is because I was a loner. My living situation was not welcoming and warm, so I guess I assumed school would be the same. So I withdrew. I was a loner who devoured every book she could get her hands on.

My mother stressed the importance of education. Luckily I did well. I secured a scholarship at a Catholic boarding school. This support was mirrored in tertiary studies, when the Italian government funded part of my studies. To cover the shortfall I had to work while studying: At some stage I held three jobs at a time - at the university library, the bookshop, and at a clothing store.

My time at university was not without upheaval. I would occasionally need to choose between classes and political rallies; between education and dodging teargas; between the quest for knowledge and the desire for a just society.

After years of sacrifice, I graduated with a Bachelors Degree in Communication Science. I must admit that the young me dreamed of being on TV and thought Communication Science would help with that. But – just in case – I carried on studying and completed a University diploma in education and an Honours in Communication.

My first job was as a teacher. I loved it. I found it rewarding. But I left it for a job in the public relations section of a South African snack foods manufacturer and distributor.

Because I was young, ambitious and educated, I thought I would go far. But I quickly realised my naivety. My boss at the time was

younger than me and relatively less educated. But she had something I would never have: She was white in a society that had just emerged from centuries of colonialism and decades of apartheid. And in so many ways she made me feel as though the company had done me a favour by hiring a “first black PRO”. I worked hard to prove that I deserved the position, in hind sight, this is where I learned to work hard and did not mind doing even menial jobs.

Over the years, I held many positions in the communications divisions of the EU office in South Africa; the Economic Affairs and Tourism Sector of the province of KwaZulu/Natal; the South African Department of Minerals and Energy; the Independent Electoral Commission; and the Chamber of Mines.

Across these positions, there were the occasional comments about my race or my gender that seemed normal to some, but deeply insulting to me. But I try my best not to dwell on them. I could use them as fodder to fuel my anger. But I have realised that anger feels good sometimes. But it holds me back. It stifles my growth.

PERSONAL IS GENERAL

Ladies and gentlemen, having painted the picture of a younger me, I would now like to take some time to place this story in context.

What are the factors that culminated in me walking the streets barefoot? Why did I need to choose between education and dodging teargas? Why would a black South African in a country where blacks comprise 90% of the population struggle to be accepted in the job market?

I grew up in a country in which racial segregation and white supremacy were central aspects of the South African policies.

The apartheid system, introduced in the 1940s, followed three hundred years of colonial racism. Apartheid progressively disenfranchised the indigenous black people, stripped them of their dignity, curtailing their rights, their citizenship and they could not vote in their country. Repressive laws like the group areas act; separate amenities act; and the prohibition of mixed marriages act were introduced to control the movement of the indigenous people now deemed non-citizens.

BANTU EDUCATION

The most disabling act of the apartheid system was when its claws extended to the education space, suppressing whatever glimpse of hope or dreams there was for a black child. Bantu education was introduced to shape the future of a black child for the lower echelons of the labour market.

Hendrick Verwoerd the architect of apartheid, who was South Africa's Minister of Native Affairs from 1958-1966, addressing parliament on government's education policies said < I quote>

"There is no place for Bantu in the European Community above the level of certain forms of labour.... What is the use of teaching the Bantu child mathematics when it can not use it in practice? Education must train people in accordance to the sphere in which they live."
<close quote>

Walking barefoot to school was therefore not unheard of or even accidental. It was the culmination of policies meant to disempower black South Africans. Policies that placed 90% of the population on the fringes of society. Physically, we were often not allowed to live in urban areas. And economically, we were not allowed to meaningfully own land or participate in the mainstream economy.

POLITICAL RESISTANCE

Dodging teargas while at university also was not unusual at that time. Our continued pleas for justice and peace were only met with violent repression by the white minority government. Growing up, I thought it was normal that a country's security forces turn against its *own population*. We had police vans at the few black universities, shooting at us, trying to quell protests. We had the army in black

communities, rounding up our brothers and sisters, trying to suppress our frustration.

There is a belief in some societies that if you are not successful, it is because you did not work hard enough. I feel that only those who have *not* truly struggled can believe this. It takes an incredible amount of strength to battle a society where it seems all the rules are against you. For me, there were literally guns and armies and tanks on my streets. For others around the world it might be less obvious. When your culture is not “mainstream”, trying to make it requires more than hard work. It requires adapting and sometimes letting a little bit of yourself go. Just ask a person of colour who has had to choose between his cultural clothes or a suit and tie. Just ask a woman who walked into a boardroom and realised that she was – once again – the only female.

SOCIETAL INJUSTICES

Indeed, the challenges of being female in a patriarchal society are well documented. After all, the rules of the racist and patriarchal society I grew up in made it socially acceptable for men like my father to abandon their wives and children. As a *black* female in apartheid South Africa, we faced oppression from *three* areas: our race, our gender and our class. The playing fields in society, ladies and gentlemen, were therefore *not* equal. It did not take – and *does*

not take – the same amount of effort for a black female to succeed as it does for somebody from a privileged race, a privileged gender, or a privileged class.

For me to be standing here today was because of the unified efforts by South African Women who took to the streets in protest for recognition and the most significant of these protests was the August 1956 march by about 20 000 women of all races against the apartheid pass laws, singing the freedom song “Wathint’ abafazi, wathintint’ imbokodo”, roughly translated “[When] You strike a woman, you strike a rock”

The slogan “Wathint’ abafazi, wathint’ imbokodo” has since become a war cry representing women’s strength, determination and courage. The 1956 march led to significant changes in the pursuit of the emancipation of women in South Africa,

Today I am standing on the shoulders of giants like Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, Albertina Sisulu; Rahima Moosa, Sophie Williams-de Bruyn, Helen Joseph; Lillian Ngoyi and so many others who fought not only white domination, but also sexism. They advocated women’s rights and denounced patriarchy.

This year, South Africa celebrates 25 years since the end of apartheid. We have made countless strides that make me proud to represent such a young and passionate country. We say *Aluta continua*: the struggle continues. Racial and gender equality must be dealt away with.

UBUNTU

Ladies and gentlemen, what those women did is what we Africans refer to as Ubuntu.

You see when Europeans arrived in South Africa some 300 years ago they may therefore have been surprised to encounter the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*. In my language, Zulu, we say "*Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*", loosely translated it means that a person is a person through other people. Ubuntu not only encompasses the concepts of humanity, but it also defines being human as interactions with other humans. Consequently – if humanity is defined by interacting with other humans – Ubuntu suggests that a person who does not reach out to other people cannot be thought of as human.

CANADIAN SOLIDARITY

As the South African High Commissioner here in Canada, there is another reason I value Ubuntu and solidarity. In the dark days of apartheid, South Africans lived under a censored media. Only those

who managed to leave our borders, were able to grasp how many friends we had abroad. We saw the display of the spirit and philosophy of *ubuntu* from other nations.

We remember and *still* appreciate how our humanity was recognised by so many of our African neighbours, and countries across our great continent, and the world who sheltered our liberators when others called them criminals or terrorists. For this South Africa is forever indebted.

It was not a coincidence that immediately after his release from prison; Nelson Mandela listed Canada as one of the priority countries to visit. In June 1990, four months after his 27 years of imprisonment, the former statesman addressed the Canadian Parliament. He said <and I quote>

“We are made better human beings by the fact that you have reached out from across the seas to say that we too, the rebels, the fugitives, the prisoners deserve to be heard.” <end quote>

CONCLUSION

So, Deputy Mayor, as South Africa celebrates 25 years of democracy, let me once again thank Canada especially Ottawa for reaching out to us across the seas. Without your solidarity during our darkest

days, I - and millions like me- may have still been walking barefoot on dusty roads, running from teargas and dodging army tanks.

It pleases me greatly to see Nelson Mandela Square just outside City Hall here in Ottawa, and every time I drive over Pretoria Bridge I feel a little closer to home.

Looking back, I know my path to success was not paved by only myself. As a child, I received financial support to complete high school. As a teenager at university I received financial support from as far away as Italy. As an adult, I recognise the loving support provided by my late husband. As a mother, I recognise that *my* mother played an immeasurable role in grounding and supporting me. I also recognise that my children have had to unfairly prop *me* up at certain times. Standing here as the High Commissioner of South Africa, my team at the Mission is my strength. Support and solidarity are therefore essential to success.

In conclusion, Ladies and gentlemen, I can only urge you to embrace diversity: Don't tell yourself you "don't see colour." Don't pretend colour and differences do not exist. Diversity should never be ignored. Instead, let us learn about what makes us all different and grow from that.

I leave you with the urge to embrace Ubuntu: don't forget that everybody is human. If you are successful, it is because society or somebody has helped you reach your position. Now, look back and help those behind you.

I thank you.