ADDRESS BY THE PREMIER OF THE EASTERN CAPE PROVINCE, MR MBULELO SOGONI, AT THE PROVINCIAL WOMEN’S DAY CELEBRATIONS, AT ALFRED NZO AUGUST 8, 2008

Theme: “STRENGTHENING GOVERNMENT EFFORTS TO POVERTY ERADICATION THROUGH ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN”

It is 52 years since thousands of women marched on the Union Buildings in Pretoria to protest against the carrying of pass books, one of the vilest and one of the most tangible expressions of oppression against black people by the apartheid government.

Today, on National Women’s Day, we commemorate that historic event, when women, not for the first time and certainly not for the last, took up the cudgels against racism and oppression in our country. We remember the contribution of those women and all women who fought against the repressive regime in diverse ways, who contributed in real ways towards the birth of our republic in 1994. Were it not for those women, mothers and sisters, daughters and comrades, we would not be here today, in a democratic and free South Africa. We thank you, each one of you.

But we also must remember the struggles of women even today, far from the glare of publicity and removed from the affirmation and support of others. Each day, women in our society and in the world are showing themselves strong and resilient in the face of the vilest oppression:

- There is physical abuse and violence perpetrated against them by fathers and husbands and sons in the name of culture and religion; domestic
violence is a scourge which we can and must remove from our society through education programmes as well as through greater efforts in our policing and criminal justice systems.

- There is discrimination in the workplace and in society at large.
- Despite the abolition of slavery 170 years ago, vast numbers of our women are forced to work against their will and for menial wages – in factories, as domestic workers and in the sex industry.
- Immigrant women are especially at risk as they have become the focus of unwarranted, xenophobic anger by local communities in acts of violence especially rape.
- Women also face the challenge of contracting HIV-Aids.

These acts of abuse are, in most cases, borne silently by the victims, as our communities, social and legal support systems are not geared up to deal with their plights. But the most debilitating attack on our women comes from a systemic oppressor – poverty.

More than 54 percent of the 6.4 million inhabitants of our province are women – and the vast majority of them live in abject poverty in the rural areas of our province. Our understanding of the historic under-development in the former homeland economy which has seen endemic poverty in Alfred Nzo, OR Tambo and Chris Hani district municipalities, has been affirmed by the Eastern Cape Economic Barometer which is measuring economic activity. The barometer shows up the broad band of poverty which cuts across our province in these districts.

When we commit ourselves as a province, therefore, to achieving the objectives of the Provincial Growth and Development Programme, we know that those initiatives will directly impact on the women of the Eastern Cape. Government’s strategy to address poverty among women as the poorest of the poor must be a multi-faceted one. It must look at increasing the numbers of women in employment in the formal sector notably the manufacturing sector centred on our urban nodes. We cannot rest on our laurels and believe that the manufacturing
sector is fine. We must work to make it more competitive globally while ensuring that the numbers of people employed in this sector grow as a result of investment and re-investment by new and existing industries.

But our strategy must also acknowledge that the vast majority of our poor, and therefore the vast majority of our women, are in the rural areas, such as here in Alfred Nzo, far away from the economic benefits of living in a major metropolitan area. We must provide opportunities here for these women. The Department of Agriculture, and the Department of Economic Affairs, Environment and Tourism will be crucial drivers of these opportunities, with all other provincial government departments playing critical supportive roles in addressing under-development and promoting growth and employment.

We cannot effectively deal with the challenges of a rural-based economy without addressing issues of land reform as well as access to funding for small-scale farmers. Here I want to commit Government to effective implementation of land re-distribution and management policies to ensure access to land for local communities as a key pillar of both food security and surpluses. I also want to encourage our women to seek opportunities for coming together in co-operatives which can assist in all aspects of agricultural production, marketing and distribution.

Infrastructure backlogs in the rural areas must be eliminated through a commitment by the relevant departments to service delivery. This includes our provincial education and health departments, where spending will have significant impact on the lives of our women.

We have said that significantly more infrastructure spending is being allocated to the eastern half of the Province through Asgisa Eastern Cape, to drive the agri-processing and forestry sectors in the Mzimbvubu basin and the North-Eastern Cape forests around Ugie. Food security through agrarian transformation, addressing logistics inefficiencies through a R2 billion road construction and
upgrade programme, and job-creation strategies, are all measures being implemented.

Government’s role in promoting policies and strategies which affirm women’s place in the economy is critical.

In pointing to the roles which individual departments can play, I am assuming the very significant role which the provincial parastatals can play in this process. The Eastern Cape Tourism Board, Eastern Cape Development Corporation and the East London and Coega Industrial Development Zones – among others - can and must promote women-owned businesses in our province.

And then we must ensure that many more women, through our bursary, mentorship and internship programmes, get opportunities to study and develop themselves and prepare to play a meaningful role in the economy.

Today, I also call on the private sector, to play a role in addressing the inequalities which are prevalent in our communities and which affect women mainly. We know that, without partnerships between Government and the private sector in a broad range of initiatives, we will not eliminate poverty. The private sector can play a role in all the opportunities I have outlined here today.

The challenges for women, 14 years after democracy, remain significant. Equally challenging, is Government’s ability to affirm the role of women in our society and ensure that the struggles they wage on a daily basis are eliminated.

I thank you

Mr Mbulelo Sogoni
Premier of the Eastern Cape Province