

REMARKS BY THE MINISTER OF HIGHER EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND INNOVATION, DR BLADE NZIMANDE ON THE OCCASION OF THE SOUTH AFRICA WOMEN IN SCIENCE (SAWISA) AWARDS 2023

08 September 2023

The Programme Director,
Chairperson of the Portfolio Committee on Higher Education, Science, Ms Nompandolo Mkhashwa;
The Director-General of the Department of Science and Innovation, Dr Phil Mjwara;
Our guest speaker for tonight, Dr Judy Dlamini;
Ambassadors and High Commissioners present;
Representatives of L'Oreal South Africa;
Ms Desree Mcunu, who is Ms Ndoni Mcunu's mother – one of the categories in the 2023 SAWISA re-branded as the DSI Fellowships;
Black Women in Science (BWIS) Fellows;
Other VIPs present;
Distinguished guests;
Ladies and gentlemen

I am delighted to be joining all of you today on this occasion of the South African Women in Science (SAWISA) Awards 2023, which are our premium awards in celebration of women who are contributing immensely to our Science, Technology and Innovation (STI) sector.

On top of the acknowledgements which I have already done, I would also like to acknowledge all those women who completed a training session during the course of the day as part of the continuation of the Black Women in Science (BWIS) legacy of Ms Ndoni Mcunu. Congratulations and I must say that we are very proud of you!!!

I have it on good authority, at least from the Programme Director, whom I am only acknowledging now after putting her in the spotlight, that the theme for this elaborate celebratory ceremony in honour of our women in science and academia, is:

“Harnessing technological change and innovation to achieve gender equality and empower women and girls” – a theme adapted from that of the 67th session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (UNCSW), which I had a privilege to attend in March this year.

To be precise, the theme of the 67th UNCSW theme is “Innovation and technological change, and education in the digital age for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls”.

ON THE AWARDS THEME

Ladies and gentlemen

The industrial revolutions are epochs in our social and economic history that are based on disruptions in innovations and technological developments, leading to advanced forms of production and service delivery.

Patriarchal attitudes, systematic barriers and certain practices and norms have defined women out of the research, scientific and technological developments that are engines of the industrial revolutions.

We therefore have seen successive industrial revolutions having effects of disrupting or changing the lives of societies and economies.

With each industrial revolution, whole industries were adjusted or disrupted, new ones were created, and existing occupations and job families went through a fundamental changes, with far reaching consequences for societies.

Yes, currently the digital era is upon us and the question remains: How can we “Harness technological change and innovation in the digital age to achieve gender equality and empower women and girls”?

Some of the answers to this question are contained in the breath-taking and ground-breaking research conducted by some of the women finalists and winners that we are about to honour and celebrate tonight.

By way of illustration, their research work covers broad areas such as (among others):

- safety and violence with a focus on violence against children and, ways of preventing it, and promoting child wellbeing, sometime with the use of digital enablers/technologies;
- historical trauma and gendered suffering through the use of practical therapeutic tools such as embroidery to facilitate healing through the re-stitching/re-telling/re-storying of social trauma;
- gender equality through explorations of best practices in working with men to end violence against women;
- congenital and rheumatic heart disease, HIV in adolescents, and cardiac disease in women of childbearing age;
- laser applications in cancer therapy by bringing together different disciplines (biochemistry, laser physics, organic chemistry, botany and nanotechnology), and research collaborators across Africa;
- effects of nanomaterials on the properties and quality of building bricks developed from waste to usher in a circular economy in which waste materials such as plastics are beneficiated into high-quality and affordable building materials, especially for low-income earners in South Africa. The research may lead to job creation, especially for women, who are excluded in the built environment sector;

- the technical possibilities of cost-effective implementation of 5G networks in developing countries with an aim of contributing towards equitable internet access, reducing barriers for small businesses, and fostering competition in the telecommunications industry; machine learning in astronomy, specifically on automating scientific discovery in massive astronomical datasets from telescopes such as MeerKAT and the Square Kilometre Array; and
- youth entrepreneurial ecosystem in exploring the hidden entrepreneurial businesses that significantly contribute to innovation and economic development.

I have been asked by my officials that the above account of the repertoire of research projects drawn from our runner-ups and winners should not be taken as an indication of who the outright winners in different categories might be.

In fact, my officials assured me that this is very randomized selection of research projects from a stable of excellent research projects done by our finalists overall.

I would then invite you to whet your appetite by finding time to read the profiles of the amazing work of these women researchers and scientists in different print and digital media platforms.

ON OUR STI WHITE PAPER AND DECADAL PLAN

Programme Director – ladies and gentlemen

Our (2019) White Paper on STI engages with the pivotal changes brought by the modern technology in promoting inclusivity, transformation, the development of human capabilities, knowledge expansion, and innovation in ensuring that the benefits of the digital economy are enjoyed by all South Africans.

The measures aimed at greater gender inclusion in our recently approved STI Decadal Plan (2022-2032) – our ten-year plan, include the STI Transformation Framework, and the STI Gender Strategy that is aligned to the government-wide gender responsive planning and budgeting framework. This framework also includes the youth and people living with disabilities.

The STI Decadal Plan is also the most progressive strategic formulation of the interdependences and complementarities between scientific and technological innovation on the one hand, and research in the social sciences and humanities on the other.

This is the reason why SAWISA awards are made for both Natural and Engineering Sciences, and the Human and Social Sciences.

The STI Decadal Plan also espouses and promotes the trans- and interdisciplinarity nature of knowledge creation. It is for this reason that I would want SAWISA to also consider having an award for trans and interdisciplinary research in the near future.

ON GENDER BASED VIOLENCE

This then ushers my last point about a critical social issue affecting women (the GBV) and also the general mental well-being of our society as expressed in rampant violent crimes in our society.

In response to GBV in the PSET and the STI sectors, last month, I have launched the Transforming MEN'talities project which will contribute to bringing about a change in gender norms and to tackling gender inequalities.

Transforming MENTalities is about transforming the way men and boys build relations with women and girls, about the liberation of men and boys from anachronistic and dominant positionalities, confronting toxic masculinities.

It is about men and boys unlearning regressive habits and embracing emancipatory values, norms, roles and practices in the multiplicity of relationships they enjoy with women and girls.

This relational perspective is important as it requires men and boys to be active participants in the co-creation of new ways of relating to women and girls in private and public, domestic and professional, economic, social and political life.

This transformation programme will ensure that there is constructive and respectful dialogue, willingness for men and boys to be vulnerable and open to embracing a new pathway, an ability to listen, learn and unlearn in multiple relational settings with women and girls.

Transforming MENTalities is therefore a campaign to establish the co-creational responsibilities of men and boys in the struggle for gender equality.

Furthermore, I want to argue that the term Transforming MENTalities should not imply an idealistic perspective of gender transformation – that is, the notion that a mere appeal to changing the 'mentality' of men and boys will, by itself, liberate women from gender inequality and oppression. We have to engage in a range of comprehensive activities and campaigning.

This programme is an addition to our policy on GBV and subsequent protocols that we have introduced to confront the scourge of GBV within our PSET sector.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, let me take this opportunity to thank the DSI and our sponsors for these prestigious awards.

I wish the winners and finalists well in their future endeavors. I am also looking forward to a resounding participation by KZN institutions in the future Awards.