

President Cyril Ramaphosa: Launch of Declaration against Gender-Based Violence and Femicide and opening of Booyens Magistrate's Court

28 Mar 2019

Address by President Cyril Ramaphosa at the launch of the Declaration against Gender-Based Violence and Femicide and the official opening of the Booyens Magistrate's Court in Booyens, Johannesburg

Programme Director,
Premier of Gauteng, Mr David Makhura,
Ministers and Deputy Ministers,
MECs and members of the provincial legislature,
Members of the judiciary,
Members of the legal fraternity,
Representatives of civil society,
Religious and community leaders,
Members of the Oakdene and Booyens communities
Members of the media,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to be here this morning during Human Rights Month, to fulfil the promise our government made to the people of South Africa: that we will take firm, decisive and swift action to eradicate gender-based violence and femicide in our society.

Right here, today, we are turning the tide.

The character of a country can be judged by how that society's most vulnerable are treated.

We have heard the pleas of survivors of gender-based violence to be treated with respect by our criminal justice system.

In opening this new sexual offences court at Booyens we are affirming the right of the women and girls of this country to be treated with professionalism and empathy.

The opening of the court, together with the declaration against gender-based violence and femicide, are two of the measures we have put in place since the Presidential Summit convened in November last year.

The Summit, which was attended by over 1,200 women from all walks of life, opened the eyes of our people to the gravity and impact of gender-based violence.

Since the Summit we have seen the rise of a mass-based social movement that has embraced both women and men from across racial, cultural, religious, political and socio-economic divides.

They have been united by one common cause – to see an end to gender-based violence.

We have gathered here today representatives from across society, from women's organisations, from faith-based and community organisations, and from the legal and law enforcement fraternity.

As a nation, today we are making a bold and unequivocal declaration that we will not yield to gender-based violence.

We will not allow it to steadily consume our people, to erode our dreams of a stable and peaceful society in which all have equal rights and opportunities, regardless of their race, gender, sexual orientation or the circumstances of their birth.

In signing this declaration against gender-based violence and femicide we are saying, as a collective, that the cancer of women abuse has no place whatsoever in our homes, in our communities, in our churches, in our schools, on our streets and in our villages, towns and cities.

Human Rights Month gives us cause to reflect on how far we have come as a nation in entrenching a human rights culture across all sectors of society.

Our Constitution and Bill of Rights is one of the most progressive in the world, and holds the right to equality, to freedom, to dignity and security of the person among its key aspirations.

Yet, for so many of this country's women, these aspirations have not been met.

So many of our country's women face a reality of harassment, of abuse and of violence.

Our nation is facing a crisis.

Our women no longer feel safe, in their homes, and on the streets.

Rape, abuse and sexual assault is rampant, often committed by those closest to them.

Gender-based violence impacts us all.

It exacts a heavy toll on relationships, on families, on communities, on workplaces, on schools and on universities and colleges.

It breeds fear and suspicion in a society that is still coming to terms with a divided and violent past.

I said at last year's Presidential Summit that there is no acceptable level of gender-based violence.

We don't want to bring the figures down; we want to eradicate this evil from our society.

We have enacted progressive legislation like the Domestic Violence Act, the Sexual Offences and Related Matters Act, the Child Justice Act and the Prevention and Combating of Trafficking in Persons Act, to name but a few.

We need serious introspection, however, as to why our laws are still failing to adequately protect vulnerable women and children.

We have to ask why, despite the resources we have dedicated to combating this problem in the criminal justice system, do survivors feel that our law-enforcement system and our courts are victimising them all over again?

Above all, we have to ask whether in advancing our various policies and programmes to combat gender-based violence, we are truly adhering to the ethos of the Constitution and Bill of Rights.

Access to courts is a fundamental human right.

It facilitates the protection of other rights such as the right to equality, to privacy and to dignity.

It is therefore fitting that the signing of the Declaration is taking place here in Booyens, where we are launching the 84th dedicated Sexual Offences Court established since 2013.

The existence of the court is an indication of higher reporting rates and confidence from the community that such support services work.

At the same time, the fact that we have over 80 such courts is also an indication of the grave extent of sexual offences in our country and is a sad indictment of our society.

Here we have established an integrated and comprehensive facility that will provide services to survivors of gender-based violence in several courts: a sexual offences court, domestic violence court, a maintenance court, a children's court, four district courts, a civil court and a regional court.

In launching this facility we aim to put an end to the secondary victimisation of survivors of gender-based violence.

According to some research, only one in nine cases of rape are reported in South Africa.

This is in no small part due to what UNICEF describes as 'a general lack of confidence in the criminal justice system', but also to the way in which survivors of sexual violence are treated if and when their cases make it to trial.

This facility is geared towards providing a safe and comforting space that protects their rights to dignity.

It enables the effective handling of gender-based violence cases to ensure that victims see justice.

Just as we strengthen our ability to arrest and successfully prosecute offenders, we must intensify the broad range of measures required to prevent such violence in the first place.

We must make greater use of research and evidence to devise holistic interventions.

We must introduce life skills training for our young people that focuses on building respect in relationships, gender equity and strengthening communication and other relationship skills.

Research has shown that this results in a reduction of intimate partner violence in adolescents.

We must strengthen government funding efforts to focus on criminal enforcement, advocacy for survivors and building local capacity, because research has also shown that this leads to a decrease in rape statistics.

We must support women and girls who seek to obtain temporary restraining orders against their abusers, and increase awareness around dating violence.

We must better coordinate our activities as government, between government departments and with civil society.

We must focus on improving various criminal justice and social interventions, combined with tracking mechanisms to measure the effectiveness of our responses.

The Declaration we are signing today represents our commitment to implement a comprehensive and effective prevention and response programme to end gender-based violence and femicide in our country.

Through this Declaration we are affirming that political, government, business and community leadership should take joint responsibility in ending gender-based violence and femicide.

This leadership should be held accountable for actions and omissions that serve as obstacles to achieving the goal of ending this scourge.

We have agreed to establish an Interim Steering Committee with resources to establish a permanent multi-sectoral coordinating body and implement actions in this Declaration.

The Interim Steering Committee, which has already been established, will develop an action plan and the structure of the multi-sectoral steering committee.

It will also map the response of services provided for survivors, establish a National Rapid Response to support survivors, and develop guidelines for ethical media reporting.

The multi-sectoral coordinating body will be championed by the President and governed by a statutory framework.

It is significant and necessary that most of members of this body will be members of civil society.

Government, working together with its partners, will review the existing laws and policies related to gender-based violence and femicide to determine if they are adequate.

In particular, we will finalise outstanding legislation such as the Prevention and Combating of Hate Crimes and Hate Speech Bill and the Victim Support Services Bill.

We will work with all stakeholders to develop policy around the decriminalisation of sex work.

There is a need for government to investigate harmful religious and cultural practices that lead to the sexual exploitation of women and children.

As we establish these new structures, we commit ourselves in this Declaration to maintain, resource, strengthen and reinvigorate the existing gender machinery.

It is our desire with this Declaration to strengthen the country's capacity to produce research and database to inform evidenced-based policies and programming.

Survivors of gender-based violence need to be treated with fairness, respect and privacy.

We will therefore work to enable communicators and institutions responsible for communication to develop, adopt and execute ethical guidelines for reporting.

To prevent gender-based violence requires that we implement social behaviour change programmes in our communities to tackle patriarchal values and norms.

We must target people who can influence attitudes, behaviours and practices that promote gender-based violence.

Through this Declaration, we aim to ensure that our economic development model takes into consideration non-gender conforming people and other marginalised groups such as people with disabilities.

Having regard to the adoption of the Summit Declaration by the delegates of the Presidential Gender-Based Summit;

And having agreed that this Declaration is the embodiment of priority actions setting a roadmap to a South Africa free from gender-based violence and femicide as envisioned in the National Development Plan 2030;

And having acknowledged that this Declaration is an affirmation of intent;

Now in my capacity as President of the Republic of South Africa, therefore proclaim that this Presidential Summit Declaration against Gender-Based Violence and Femicide is hereby assented to and signed on behalf of the government of South Africa.

I now invite the representatives of the civil society to come and sign.

I will call them in this order:

1. #TheTotalShutDown
2. Call to action
3. Genderlinks
4. KwaZulu-Natal Network on Violence against Women
5. National Shelter Movement of South Africa
6. Shukumisa Campaign
7. Stop Gender-based Violence Campaign
8. Women Inkwelo Network
9. Women on Farms Project

Today, begins a new era in our determined struggle to rid our society of gender-based violence and femicide.

The commitments made in this Declaration are far-reaching and will require a great deal of effort, resources and cooperation.

We are determined that we should implement all these resolutions, without delay and without fail.

Working together, I am certain that we will succeed.

I thank you.

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