



Office of the Principal and Vice Chancellor

Advancing Gender Equality in Higher Education and the Broader Society

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UNISA

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Ladies and Gentlemen, students and colleagues,

Good morning.

I am delighted that you have all heeded my call and invitation to you to discuss the theme '**Advancing Gender Equality and Excellence in Higher education and The Broader Society**', this morning.

I want to begin by acknowledging and expressing my gratitude to our two keynote speakers, Ms. Lulu Letlape, the current Vice President: Communications and External Affairs at BHP Billiton and Dr Nondumiso Maphazi, Commissioner at the Commission for Gender Equality who have both respectively shared their expertise with us and deliberated on the significance of advancing gender equality, justice, excellence, in the transformation of our broader society, business and higher education.

I am confident that you will agree with them in their conviction, passion and assertion that all sectors of society, including institutions of higher learning such as UNISA, the corporate and civil society ought to create enabling environments for the equitable development and participation of men and women, boys and girls if our societies are to advance.

One of the fundamental and founding documents of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, has emphasized the importance of recognizing, affirming and respecting the value of equality and justice for all human beings. It states in its preamble for instance, that “the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights for all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.”

The context of South Africa three decades ago, did not match these values. Instead, a hierarchical system which allotted human dignity to people in particular degrees, pertained, and as well, legislated through laws that denied the full humanity of others, and/ or equal rights, equal access and parity.

In a paper commissioned by the Development Bank of southern Africa published in April 2010, Saleem Badat, poignantly describes the context which had for long, defined the general and higher education landscape in South Africa then, and as well, which provides a good basis for our appeal toward transforming South Africa's higher education landscapes into those in which the values of excellence, inclusivity, transformation and excellence are evident in the core business of higher education, that is, teaching and learning, research and innovation and community engagement. Badat states;

“In South Africa, social inequalities were embedded and reflected in all spheres of social life, as a product of the systematic exclusion of blacks and women under colonialism and apartheid. The higher education was no exception. Social, political and economic discrimination and inequalities of class, race, gender, institutional and spatial nature profoundly shaped, and continue to shape, South Africa's higher education.”

The legacies and sometimes the vestiges of the context I have just described, thus require us in society and at UNISA to delve seriously on the questions of transformation and excellence. They call us to engage with contemporaries and experts from other sectors, including business and the public sector such as we have done today in order to identify best lessons and best practices relevant in the development of our own institutions and society. Equally, they invite us to seriously interrogate how we can advance equality and excellence in our institutions.

The women's day in South Africa (9th August) and the international women's day in the world (8th March) have made the questions of gender justice, equality and parity visible in the psyche of societies and institutions.

The notion of gender equality therefore continually reverberates in various aspects of our society. It is an ideal that we as a people should and ought to continue to strive for. It is crucial to remind ourselves of the importance of dialogue, safe spaces, interrogation of laws and policies when patriarchal systems continue to operate not only within the private but find their way into the public spheres as well. Institutions of higher learning such as Unisa are spaces where engagements on possible ways towards the realization of 'true equality' continue to take place.

It is also important for us to note that while many strides have been made, work still needs to be undertaken to bridge the gaps and or barriers which disable gender equality and excellence, especially those which continue to exist between national policies and lived experiences.

This is particularly true to some of the developments and or contradictions in our societies. Whilst on the one hand there seems to be openness and commitment toward gender equality in law, in education and other spheres, we seem to also lag in other areas, for example, our country continues to have high levels of various forms of abuse against women.

According to Statistics South Africa, although there has been an increase in women employment... many women continue to be involved in unpaid labour and form a large percentage of low wage labour. Unemployment and illiteracy continue to be higher for women.

The Council on Higher Education (CHE) also proclaims that "although strides have been made, women academics are still losing out to male colleagues at South African universities, especially at senior level".

In Keeping with the Council on Higher Education call and declaration in 2008, that called for action to improve gender equity in academic, administrative and executive leadership in higher education at all levels, UNISA has to pride itself on the fact that it has, and continues

to a large extent, attract in almost all its ranks, a generally equitable number of women leaders to men in executive and extended management levels, as well as academic and administrative levels.

Unisa continues to play an active role in supporting and encouraging women scholars to spread their wings. Through our endeavors' at being an ethical university in the service of humanity, that is agile, contextual and global, UNISA is creating an environment that encourages women and men, and women in particular, to know that the sky is no longer the limit; but to harness the passion and commitment to be and do the best and to triumph over barriers, whether economic, political, social, and et cetera, such as patriarchy, misogyny and sexism which limit them from being the best they require to be.

I wish you all, a good day and hope the month will generate innovative and exciting discourses, work and teaching and learning approaches and research which will help advance our society, enable women to succeed and overcome impediments which limit their efforts toward success and excellence.

I also encourage all of you to ensure that our society and institutions in any sector that you are in, will take seriously the imperatives for the larger societal agenda of social equity, transformation and development of South Africa, Africa and the world, in which women and men are treated equally and provided the space, means and opportunities to be the best people they are purposed to be.

Thank You.