



August 2024: PSA commemorates Women’s Day and calls on all workers to observe a moment of silent in remembrance of 34 Marikana Workers

“Conformity is the jailer of freedom and the enemy of growth ...only the very courageous will be able to take the hard and unpopular decisionsⁱ”

JF Kennedy, *Profiles in Courage*

The month of August is a significant month on the calendar of South Africa. It is a month in which we commemorate and celebrate the contribution of South African women in the quest for freedom in our land.

On 9 August 1956, approximately 20 000 women of South Africa marched to the Union Buildings in protest against apartheid oppressive pass laws epitomised by the then *Urban Areas Act*. Neither the roaring sounds of machine guns, vicious barking dogs, smoke of tear gas, nor brigades of police could intimidate, let alone stop them from pursuing their struggle for justice. They refused to conform with the *status quo* and fought for freedom in the face of a brutal and repressive government.

This was the occasion that brought the plight of women, especially African women to a sharp focus. It was during this march when the slogan, *Wathint’Abafazi Wathint’imbokodo!* (*Now you have touched the women, you have struck a rock*), gained currency. We are deeply indebted to their acts of courage and bravery for the freedom we enjoy today.

Whilst at the centre of the struggle in South Africa was a quest for freedom, for the women it was more than that. African women suffered multiple oppression, from apartheid system, patriarchy, sexism, to gender-based violence. Sixty-eight years later, the women of South Africa are still not free. They are not free from bondage, not free from patriarchy, not free from domestic and gender-based violence. Hence, the annual commemoration of 9 August is meant to remind us of where we come from and to draw attention to the struggles that women continue to face.

As a major Union in the public sector, the PSA will continue to be at the forefront, waging the struggle for gender equality, equal pay, social justice, and women empowerment in the public sector.

The month of August is also important in the history of labour relations in South Africa. On that fateful day of 16 August 2012, 34 mine workers were massacred in Marikana by police whilst protesting for decent pay. Like the women of 1956, the Marikana workers were not intimidated by choppers hovering, razor wires that rounded them off, and automated guns of the police. They laid their lives in quest for decent pay. The Marikana tragedy is a blot on our democracy and an indictment of our failures to address, let alone to halt the socio-economic inequalities in our society. The PSA calls on all workers to spare a minute during their lunch hour this month to observe a moment of silence in honour and remembrance of the acts of courage of the Marikana martyrs.

Whilst the struggles for the emancipation of women must begin with dislodging patriarchy in society, true emancipation and empowerment of women must be realised at the workplace and the public service must lead by example. The PSA sees a direct relation between the struggles for women empowerment and workers' struggles.

Women play a vital role in the public service in South Africa, contributing significantly to the country's development and transformation. Despite historical gender disparities, women have made strides in driving change in society. In the new democratic dispensation, we have witnessed the upliftment of women into position of leadership in politics and in government.

However, there is still much to be done. Women bear the brunt of unemployment, with unemployment numbers for women at 35.7%, which is according to Stats SAⁱⁱ, higher than the national average. Similarly, there is still underrepresentation in senior positions in the workplace, with the Department of Employment and Labour reporting in 2023 that a mere 26.5% of women occupied top management of the workforce in South Africa.ⁱⁱⁱ Meanwhile, wage disparities by gender persist, especially in the private sector. Women in South Africa earn 78 cents for every R1 earned by their male counterparts.^{iv} This is irrespective of them performing similar jobs. All of these tells us that the struggle is not over! We cannot rest until women are totally free; free from bondage; and until we have defeated the scourge of gender-based violence in communities.

On 18 July, we commemorated the life and legacy of Nelson Mandela, a champion of justice, equality, and human rights. We remembered his tireless efforts and long enduring walk towards the building of an equitable and free society. The PSA is inspired by Madiba's values of selflessness, empathy, and service to others. The PSA recognizes the critical role the Union plays in delivering essential services to communities, often going above and beyond to make a difference in people's lives.

Even in August, let us continue to honour Madiba's legacy by volunteering time and skills to make a positive impact, fighting for the rights and dignity of all workers and citizens and striving for excellence in our work to build a better South Africa. Let us use this month to remember the lives that were lost in Marikana in the quest for decent pay. Their lives were not lost in vain!

Together, we can create a brighter future for all. Even as we make every day a Mandela Day, let us also make every day count in our efforts to advance the plight of workers in general and women in particular.

References

ⁱ Kennedy J.F., 1956, *Profiles in Courage*, Decisive moments in the lives of celebrated Americans, New York: Harper and Brothers, p.223.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=16533>

ⁱⁱⁱ [https://www.labour.gov.za/about-a-quarter-of-females-sit-in-the-top-management-level-in-sa-labour-market---employment-equity-\(2\)#:~:text=About%20a%20quarter%20of%20females,SA%20labour%20market%20-%20Employment%20Equity&text=Merely%2026.5%20percent%20of%20women,the%20top%20by%2073.5%20percent](https://www.labour.gov.za/about-a-quarter-of-females-sit-in-the-top-management-level-in-sa-labour-market---employment-equity-(2)#:~:text=About%20a%20quarter%20of%20females,SA%20labour%20market%20-%20Employment%20Equity&text=Merely%2026.5%20percent%20of%20women,the%20top%20by%2073.5%20percent)

^{iv} <https://sa-tied.wider.unu.edu/article/gender-pay-gaps-on-the-rise-in-south-africa#:~:text=New%20analysis%20of%20income%20data,to%2089%20cents%20in%202008>.