



**ADDRESS BY VERONICA DE KLERK
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**during
the *“Old Mutual Women of Substance Conference”*
to celebrate *“International Women’s Day”***

**on the subject:
*“How Women can build stronger presence in leadership positions
across all sectors of the economy”***

12 March 2010, Nampower Convention Centre

**Director of Ceremonies;
Facilitators of the “Old Mutual Women of Substance” Conference;
Distinguished invited guests;
Members of the Media; and Ladies and Gentlemen:**

Good morning!

Please allow me to congratulate the facilitators for initiating this conference, while thanking the organizers for the kind invitation extended to me to be part of this most empowering “Old Mutual Women of Substance Conference” - and to join in the celebrations of the “2010 International Women’s Day”, which bears the theme: *Women in Business – the changing face of leadership*”.

I commend Old Mutual Namibia, as title sponsor of this event, for its special interest to advance women’s status in the Namibian society and for its valued support towards the upliftment of rural women, through the programmes of Women’s Action for Development.

It is a special pleasure for me to be part of this programme and to speak on “*How Women can build stronger presence in Leadership Positions across all sectors of our economy.*”

While contemplating on this topic, it once again became clear to me that one of the most prominent reasons why so few women have made inroads into the world, traditionally dominated by men - and in particular our economy and politics - is because many women (and more especially rural women), have for generations, preferred to limit their fields of interest to the cooking pots and raising children.

As we are aware, Namibia and Africa are still ruled by men, although in all fairness it should be mentioned - and I commend and congratulate the Namibian Government - that Namibia never in its history, had so many women in top positions in the business sector, as well as at decision-making levels of Government.

However, many women have all along been happy to have men dominate practically all other activities in our society.

In the process, men built up a huge head-start in terms of knowledge and experience - and therefore, **they** are the leaders in just about every field.

Most women in Namibia are, to a lesser or greater degree, hamstrung by outdated cultural traditions which impede their development and growth, and which slows down the country's economic development.

Through my work in the rural areas of the country, one of the most profound problems which has been identified among women, apart from poverty and unemployment, is a shocking lack of self-confidence and a sense of self-value.

Women in leadership positions have an ideal opportunity to work in unison for the eradication of such cultural baggage. Our country cannot further allow the injustices suffered by women due to cultural traditions, to be practised any longer.

Women leaders should therefore, be the catalyst to bring about progress on that front to bring other marginalized women into the mainstream of the economy – and we know that the majority of women live in the rural areas of the country.

It would be extremely selfish and not promoting the cause of women, if those who have made it up the ladder, do not send the elevator back down, for others.

The country will speedily see parity in the representation of the genders in the Private Sector and Government if the present generation of women leaders start building on the next generation to be worthy successors and able to serve the nation.

Young girls should therefore, be groomed, trained and prepared timeously, for future leadership roles by experienced women leaders - whether in business or in politics, because the present challenge is that more women role-models are needed to take young girls to the next level.

To dramatically turn the tide of getting more women in all leadership positions in the country, women are called upon to start with a determined decision to get involved in the so-called male dominated world in order to excel.

If women just hang around in the male dominated board rooms as a lone female, they are very likely candidates for prejudice and ridicule.

To avoid such embarrassing situations, calls for careful and resolute preparation by women themselves. **Women can do this**, by in-depth studying the field of their special interest and expertise.

It is imperative that women acquire superlative knowledge of topics in their specific fields, because men, who have a head-start on this process, will only listen and develop respect for women if they express authoritative views, revealing sound knowledge and insights.

Knowledge and insight of a topic, is by far the best mechanism to break down all forms of prejudice against women. When women speak authoritatively and with conviction on a subject, people will listen!

Women can reach that point by reading widely; by listening attentively to speakers; by questioning and debating stand points; by analyzing facts; and by carefully formulating their statements.

We should always remember that women will have to overcome the barriers of prejudice - Hence, women will have to work particularly hard and smart in striving to attain excellence, in all they do and say.

Competence, efficiency, talent, quality of work, perseverance etc, are all special qualities with which women in particular, are endowed, and cannot forever be ignored and swept aside.

Ladies and Gentlemen: Women are here to stay....! And they will soon start making the difference, based on their useful inputs in the board room, in the classroom, in the Church, in the Judiciary, in Parliament – Yes, simply everywhere!

If you take a closer look at all the women leaders in our economy or elsewhere in the world, you will surely recognize them to be experts in their fields.

They have sound knowledge; they are able to articulate themselves well; and they do not just shrink away when faced with new challenges.

There is simply no substitute for expertise and wisdom!

I assure you that not the prettiest dress; nor the cutest smile; nor the perfect body will bring women a position of respect - only the quality of their inputs will speak for them!

Ladies and Gentlemen, male domination over many years, often clouds the judgement of men to take the opinions of women seriously - while simultaneously, women seem to have lost the art of assertiveness within business, where their male counterparts are in the majority.

In the process, women allow themselves or their valuable opinions to be swept under the carpet!

Many women prefer not to utter even one word in male company because male generated cultural traditions expect them to be quiet; to be the listeners rather than the speakers; to be the onlookers, rather than the performers..... to be subservient, rather than to be bold!

If women are to build a powerful presence and become leaders in their fields, it is imperative that they have the courage to express themselves authoritatively. They should be informed, be able to think objectively and intelligently, and come forward with sound ideas and well-conceived alternatives. That is the name of the game!

Women in leadership positions should further guard against compromising their popularity by trying to act like men while lobbying for a just cause. Instead, women should project confidence and be comfortable with themselves; they should believe in themselves, and be proud of who they are, despite whatever powerful positions they may hold.

Believe me, dear fellow-women - it is a wise woman who will refrain from acting like an arrogant soldier to attain her goals, because men will find her repulsive and avoid her.

It is a wise woman who will strive to retain her femininity, because **that** is her most powerful weapon in a male dominated world, which will bring her more gains than misfortune. After all, we were created as women and should remain and act like women!

Believe me when I say, that men appreciate and admire femininity - because femininity is beautiful! It always impresses them, whereas few things are as repulsive, as a woman who acts like a rugged, arrogant tomboy, while lobbying men to attain their goals.

Ladies and Gentlemen: I cannot stress enough, the importance of the ability of women to work particularly hard and smart, and to project commitment, dedication and perseverance in everything they do - and to express their thoughts in clear, well formulated language, if they wish to gain high regard for their views. There are very few things as impressive as sheer hard work, passion and determination to WIN - and the power of speech!

I have often heard people speak..... But after they were done, I could not recall anything tangible they spoke about! This can be, due to confused language, or a lack of insights - or both.

Women should never allow their inputs, by which their quality is judged, to go astray because people could not grasp what they were saying.

But having said that, all is not doom and gloom for women in business, since they are generally viewed to be less corrupt and more caring about bread and butter issues.

In view of rampant corruption across the African Continent, the perception of women leaders as less corrupt, should be embraced by them, to firmly establish themselves in leadership positions at all levels in business.

An area which women often shy away from, is the scrutinizing spotlight which the media exposes public figures to.

Women, aspiring for leadership positions in business, should challenge any inhibitions which they may have, and use the media as a tool to source information..... and in so doing, to continuously communicate with the audiences they serve. This would be an excellent way to market themselves as leaders in their respective fields.

Media bashfulness will not serve the cause of women in business well, and will not boost their image within their business ranks.

To deal with the media in a way that ensures regular coverage of the performance of a businesswoman and her business, through correct reporting, is

an art that businesswomen should soon master after having been appointed to powerful positions in the Business Sector.

The media can make or break a businesswoman, depending upon their performance and the relationship and trust they build up with the media.

For women to hold powerful leadership positions, brings honour.... **YES!** But, given the prevailing prejudice against their abilities, it also holds an enormous responsibility towards other women as well! It puts all women leaders in the spotlight and the focus of public scrutiny - not only in business, but in politics as well!

With such focus on their activities and on how they handle their positions, I honestly do not see scope and justification for in-fighting and pettiness among women leaders. The communality of problems facing women, such as inequality; a lack of self-confidence; exposure to gender based violence; HIV/AIDS; poverty; unemployment etc, cannot be superseded by personal differences.

In this context, it is most unfortunate that male politicians are continuously accusing women, that they are not progressing in politics because of in-fighting among themselves.

This is serious, Ladies & Gentlemen - because in the process, women are further weakening themselves when they tend to want to “deal” with a woman who have excellent leadership qualities and who aspires to reach greater heights of success, by pulling her down through gossiping, malicious slandering, or by viciously pulling the ladder from under her feet!

I therefore, earnestly caution, that the so-called “*Pull-Her-Down-syndrome*” (*PHD-syndrome*) among women, is extremely detrimental for women’s advancement in society, because the more women fight among themselves, the longer men will continue to snatch away powerful positions in business from them, and continue to rule on their own!

It is imperative that women should stand together; work together; be proud of the achievements of one another; and have faith in one another’s abilities.

Women should never undo the role which they can, and should fulfil in our communities, by undermining fellow-women.

This is crucial, because it is the mothers who lay the educational foundation on which the family, the school, the church and the community, can further build on.

It is therefore, imperative that women should emerge as a united force, to take their future into their own hands.

It is indeed time for women to wake up! It is time for women to progress from the kitchen - to the Board Rooms and Legislative Chambers! It is time for women to use their majority numbers and act like a **majority**, and not like a minority who beg for favours.

Women are not invitees on this planet! **We belong here and we have a right to be here!**

The time is overdue for women to strengthen their aspirations, to think bigger, to broaden their horizons, to get into those decision-making positions of power, so as to contribute towards the economic status and well-being of the nation!

WAD is doing its best in forging ahead, with a bold sense of purpose to make a positive difference in the lives of women in the country.

The successes of our various training programmes to get women into the labour market and the projects which women are running, are ample proof that women are the Key to economic prosperity in the country. Their dedication to a cause in which they believe, has often astounded me.

I therefore, have all the reason to believe in the great potential which every woman in this country represents.

Yes, Ladies and Gentlemen - all these women have borne and reared our leaders, holding influential positions in the countries of the world today!

.....And although they have, for centuries, been the most neglected and most deprived in the countries of the world - and although they have deliberately been

kept out of a male-dominated world of decision-making - **they are feeding the world...** and they remain a strong factor to be reckoned with!

It cannot be denied that the world we, as women have created for ourselves, is a product of our thinking - and the world cannot be changed without changing **our thinking!**

I have often, from many platforms, expressed my admiration for the dynamism of women -

- ✓ for their ability to perform miracles to put the next meal on the table;
- ✓ for their ability to raise a family single-handedly;
- ✓ for their hard work, commitment and dedication;
- ✓ Yes.....for **their** perseverance in the face of adversity!

They are our rural sisters out there, who are very close to my heart - Women who have been down-trodden, and who have been subjected to soft slavery for decades, due to demoralising cultural practices.

They are the real Queens!.....And I shall never be convinced otherwise!

Thank you!