MINISTER
BASIC EDUCATION
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

Private Bag X603, Pretoria, 0001 Tel • (012) 357 300 • Fax (012) 323 5989
Private Bag X9034, Cape Town, 8000 • Tel (012) 465 7350 • Fax (021) 461 4788
Website: http//www.education.gov.za

Speech by Minister Gwarube at the Women's Month Intergenerational High Tea on 16 August 2025

Programme Director,
Speaker of the National Assembly, Thoko Didiza
Our generous corporate partner Firstrand Foundation, represented by the Group's Head of Social Investing, Ms Kone Gugushe
Our keynote speaker today, the Auditor General of South Africa, Tsakani Maluleke
CEO of Kumba Iron Ore, Nompumelelo Zikalala
The women in our armed services, Colonel Tiisetso Sekgobela and Brigadier Atlenda Mathe,
Miss South Africa, Mia Le Roux
Esteemed guests,
Educators with us here today,
Most importantly, the young women in the room,
Good Morning!

When we gather like this, women and girls from different generations, each carrying our own stories of struggle, triumph, heartbreak, and hope, we are not just sharing tea and conversation. We are building a bridge across time, a bridge that carries the lessons of the past, the battles fought by those before us, and the dreams of those still to come.

Yes, I stand before you as the Minister of Basic Education, but I also stand before you as a rural girl from kwaMdingi in the Eastern Cape. I hope beyond the title, you will also see my humanity and my essence, ubumna bam.

By every statistical measure, I should have been the very face of poverty, unemployment and inequality. I am young, I am black and I am from a rural area. Statistics South Africa tells us this remains one of the most vulnerable combinations in our society.

But my story, like the stories of so many women here, is not defined by statistics. It is defined by the people who refused to let those numbers decide our fate.

For me, that person was my late grandmother. She was a teacher, a woman of unshakable conviction, and a fierce believer in the transformative power of education. She made sacrifices that I only fully understand now as an adult. She gave up her own comfort to ensure that I had access to a quality education. She poured her energy, her resources, and her heart into giving me opportunities she knew would change my future.

Today, because of her belief and her sacrifices, I have the honour of serving my country as its Minister of Basic Education. I am living proof of what becomes possible when we invest in the education of the girl child.

This Women's Month, I want us to reflect deeply on one truth, Education is the ladder that lifts girls out of poverty.
It is not just about books and classrooms, it is about giving women agency, and the freedom that comes with being a professional, and with that you give women back their dignity. It is also about giving a girl the tools to write her own story, no matter where she is born.

Whether she grows up in Lusikisiki or Langebaan, Soweto or Sandton, Midrand or indeed KwaMdingi like myself, every girl deserves the same key that unlocked my life, to access to quality education and rise to the level of our ambitions and not fall to the circumstances of our birth.

But that access must mean more than a seat in a classroom. It must mean a curicculum that empowers. It must mean safety in those schools and not have girls exposed to educators who are convicted sex offenders. It must mean opportunities that inspire and that means learners must take difficult subjects like Maths, Science, Accounting and Economics, which are gateway subjects to high powered careers.

But that journey begins with strong foundations.

If a child cannot read for meaning by the age of ten, her path to success becomes steep and rocky. That is why I have made literacy and numeracy the apex priority. To achieve that priority we are undertaking a strategic reorientation of the basic education system to strengthen the foundations of learning. Once we have lear
When we build strong educational foundations, we give every child, especially the girl child, a real shot at a life defined by possibility rather than limitation.

I am encouraged by the signs of progress we are seeing. In recent years, girls have significantly improved their performance in the National Senior Certificate examinations. In the 2024 matric results, girls accounted for more than half of all bachelor passes, opening for themselves the doors to higher education, careers, and leadership.

And something I am also proud of, is that over 92% of girls who fall pregnant now return to school and complete their studies. This is not by accident. It is because we have fought to ensure that pregnancy does not mean the end of a

girl's education. Our policies now make schools places of inclusion, not exclusion.
If you fall pregnant, it is not the end of the world, you still have your entire life ahead of you.

Ladies and Young Ladies**,** We have also expanded access to sanitary pads and hygiene education and health in our schools. We are ensuring that no girl misses school during her menstrual cycle. We have made progress, but we must keep pushing until not a single girl is forced to choose between her education and her dignity.

But keeping girls in school is only the first step. We must also expand their horizons. We must introduce the girl child early on to careers in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. We must help them see themselves as engineers, scientists, pilots, coders, entrepreneurs, as Mayors Dr Nasiphi Moya. We must dismantle gender stereotypes not only in textbooks, but in the culture of our classrooms.

Empowerment begins with a simple, powerful message, **You can!**
Every girl must walk into a classroom where her potential is recognised, where her dignity is upheld, and where her safety is assured. She must see women in leadership but she must also interact with women in leadership. We as leaders in government, in corporate and in civil society but respond with a resounding Yes when a group of girls invite us to their girls camps, we must go back to our schools annualy so that young girls see us up close and personal. In March this year I was at my alma mater, the Kingsridge High School for girls to mark Foudners day, we must do more of these engagements at our old schools.
It is our responsibility, no one elses, to ensure that young girls are nurtured to believe that she belongs, not at the margins, not in the footnotes, but at the very centre of her own story.

Earlier this year, I was invited to the Uyinene Mrwetyana memorial lecture, I spoke there about the kind of country we must become, one where girls can dream without fear. Where they can go to the post office and not fear that the government employee there will rape and kill them and bury their body in a shallow grave.
We cannot talk about empowering girls through education without talking about keeping them safe. Because no girl can learn when she is looking over her shoulder. No girl can thrive when the spaces meant to nurture her are the same spaces where her safety is compromised.

Gender-based violence remains a national crisis. It is a thief of potential, a destroyer of dreams. As the Basic Education sector, we are working with communities, parents, law enforcement, and civil society to make sure schools are safe zones, not just physically, but emotionally and socially.

But I must be honest, this is difficult work, it is a 100 times more difficult to have safe schools that exist in unsafe communities, sooner or later the violence in that community will spill over into the school in that community.

This is why school safety is a societal issue. Every adult in our communities must see themselves as a guardian of our girls' safety and dignity. In school and outside of school.

And that is why gatherings like this are so important. Because we cannot speak about change only to the young, nor only to the old, we must speak across generations.

The older generation carries the lessons of history, the resilience of those who fought for access to education when doors were locked to women, when

universities excluded Black students, when opportunity was rationed by race and gender.
The younger generation carries the urgency of now, the belief that things must change not in the distant future, but today.

When these generations come together, we do not only share stories, we transfer strength. We remind each other that every victory we enjoy was once a dream in someone else's mind, and every victory still to come depends on what we do today. We are able to lift our gaze and see soo far, because we trully stand on the shoulders of giants. Giants like Lilian Ngoyi, Ruth Mompathi, Helen Suzman, Albertina Sisulu, Felicia Mabuza, Vinollia V-mash Mashigo, Brenda Mabrrrr Fasi, Lebo Mathosa, Makhadzi, Shandesh the Vocalist, Kharishma, Shandesh Janesh, Unce Waffles, Uyinene Mrwetyana, Kone Gugushe, Nompumelelo Zikala, Dr Naisphi Moya, Mia Le Roux, Tsakani Maluleke, Sophia De-Bruyn, Helen Joseph, Charlote Maxeke and many others.

As someone who once walked the dusty streets of a rural town, I know what it's like to wonder whether your dreams are too big for the world around you. I also know what it's like to be raised by a woman who refused to let our circumstances have the final say.

That is the responsibility we all share, to be that person for someone else.
We must be the grandmother who sacrifices for her granddaughter's education. We must be the teacher who refuses to give up on the student who is falling behind. We must be the neighbour who steps in to keep a child safe. We must be the policymaker who refuses to settle for half-measures.

Because every time we open a door for a girl, we are not just changing her life, we are changing the life of her family, her community, and her country.

This Women's Month, let us not only celebrate how far we have come, let us recommit to how much further we must go.

Let us push until every girl in South Africa can read for meaning by age ten.

Until no girl misses school because of her period.

Until pregnancy no longer threatens education.

Until no girl fears walking to school.

Education is not charity. It is justice. It is the single most powerful investment we can make in our future.

I carry my grandmother's dream with me every day. She believed that the circumstances of your birth should never determine the boundaries of your dreams. It is her memory that fuels me in this office.

To the young girls in this room, your dreams are valid. Your voice matters. Your future is worth fighting for.

To the women here who have walked before us, thank you for breaking the ground we now stand on. We promise to honour your sacrifices not with words alone, but with action.

To the women here, Let us walk this road together, with education as our ladder.

Because when we lift a girl, we lift a nation.

Thank you.