

Address by ANC President Jacob Zuma on the occasion of the Charlotte Maxeke Memorial Lecture hosted by the ANC Women`s League to launch Women`s Month

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The President of the ANC Women`s League, Comrade Angie Motshekga,
Free State Provincial Chairperson Comrade Ace Magashule,
Leadership of the ANC Women`s League,
Members of the ANC NEC,
Vice-Chancellor, Leadership and students of the University of the Free State,
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

Malibongwe!

In a few days we will celebrate the 56th anniversary of the historical Women`s Month of 1956.

That was the day when, at the height of apartheid, more than 20 000 women from all walks of life converged on the then forbidden grounds of the Union Buildings to present a petition against the extension of pass laws to women.

The women reflected the whole spectrum of South African people, united in their diversity by one common goal at the time, to end the repressive pass laws.

The 1956 Women`s March thus became one of the most important milestones in our struggle for freedom.

But women`s activism did not start there. The struggles of women had begun much earlier.

That is why we are gathered here today, to celebrate the life of the great Charlotte Maxeke, a pioneer, freedom fighter and women`s rights campaigner.

This founding president of the Bantu Women`s League led the landmark women`s march against pass laws in 1913 in Bloemfontein.

It is impressive that as early as 1913, women were already mobilising themselves into a formidable force which gave an example of courage and initiative. This inspired bravery and enthusiasm in the hearts of many in the struggle.

As we commemorate the 100 years of our people`s selfless struggle for liberation, it is proper that we honour the initiative, bravery and leadership that the women demonstrated in 1913.

We can do that best through celebrating the life of Charlotte Maxeke.

We are happy to join the Women`s League to launch Women`s Month through this tribute to Comrade Maxeke, an activist, a teacher, politician and founder of the Bantu Women`s League of South Africa, a forerunner to the ANC Women`s League.

It is indeed a great privilege and distinct honour to pay tribute to one of the most revered freedom fighters in the liberation history of our country.

The former President of the ANC, Dr AB Xuma described Mama Maxeke as "the mother of African freedom in South Africa".

Comrade Maxeke was born as Charlotte Makgomo Manye on 7 April 1872 at Ramokgopa Village in Polokwane (then Pietersburg).

She grew up in an era where there was scant respect for black people in particular, and black women in general. Black women had to bear the greatest brunt and the injustices of the colonial regime`s repressive laws.

In those years, women had to contend with the triple burden of patriarchy, an oppressive regime and the exploitative economic system.

Women lived under the yoke of oppression in their own homes and in society.

The general belief perpetuated by stereotypes was that there is no productive role in life for black women than the function of maintaining households and having, and raising children as the sole occupation of their life.

As a young girl growing up in colonial South Africa, Charlotte Maxeke did not allow herself to become discouraged by the limitations imposed on black people in general and women specifically by society and the regime.

Even as a young girl, Comrade Maxeke believed that women must play a leading role in building up our movement in its struggle to defeat the enemies of the people and achieve liberation.

Comrade Maxeke developed a passion for music and religion as a form of dissent against the injustices inflicted on her people by the settler regime.

In 1890 Charlotte and her sister Katy were invited to join the Jubilee singers on a tour to Britain. During the tour Charlotte was inspired by a meeting with students from one of the oldest Afro-American universities in the United States – Wilberforce University in Ohio.

On her return to South Africa from Britain she grabbed the opportunity of travelling to the United States – this time with the McAdoo singers.

She enrolled at the Wilberforce University through the assistance of Bishop Derrick of the AME church.

While a student she arranged for other African students to study at Wilberforce, including Marshall Maxeke, later to become her husband.

She became the first black woman to obtain a Bachelor of Science degree in 1905. At that time, very few women from any population group, let alone a black woman, were graduating from university, more so in the field of science.

She bravely defied societal expectations and the limitations placed on her by virtue of her colour and gender and became a trailblazer among her peers. Not even the might of the colonial regime could hamper her yearning for education and her leadership abilities.

During her study in the United States of America, Comrade Maxeke contributed to the founding of the AME Church in South Africa in 1896.

Upon completion of her studies, she returned to her native country and founded the Wilberforce Institute with her husband, Rev Marshall Maxeke, which became one of the leading Transvaal high schools for Africans.

Thus, we salute her for her contribution to education.

Comrade Maxeke is celebrated for her selfless contribution to humanity and assistance to the vulnerable. Her work as the first black female probation officer for children who were in conflict with the law is recognised by many as having been pioneering and inspiring.

Other than her social work, it is Charlotte the political leader and activist that captures imagination and attention.

She detested pass laws and the manner in which they sought to restrict the movement of women. She decided to organise and mobilise women against pass laws.

In June 1913, she led the first anti-pass campaign against the Union government. About 700 women marched to the Bloemfontein City Council in the Orange Free State and burnt their passes.

Comrade Maxeke had led a delegation to Prime Minister Louis Botha to discuss the issue of passes for women.

The march became a catalyst for women's active involvement in the liberation struggle and sparked a broad-based mass mobilization.

Incidentally, in October of the same year, 1913 a group of eleven Transvaal Indian women, among them the 16-year old Valiamma Munswami Mudliar, began defiance activities by hawking without licences in Vereeniging.

The militant women defied the anti-Asiatic law which prohibited Indians from entering Newcastle.

They crossed the provincial border of Transvaal into Natal and provoked the miners of Newcastle to lay down their picks and strike.

Valliamma Munswami Mudliar and Comrade Maxeke constituted an important historical foundation of women leadership of the modern struggle for freedom.

Sadly Valiamma was arrested and fell ill in prison in Pietermaritzburg, unable to survive harsh prison life at the tender age of 16. She died after release from prison. She was a remarkable teenage girl who fought against racism at the same time as Charlotte Maxeke.

It was this resilience and tenacity of leaders such as Valiamma and Comrade Maxeke that built the principled and fearless foundation for the contribution of women in the effort to remove the repressive apartheid regime in South Africa.

The campaign soon gained momentum and spread to other parts of the country.

The direct result of this campaign was the establishment of the Bantu Women`s League under the leadership of Comrade Maxeke in 1918.

The Bantu Women`s League was adopted and re-launched by the African National Congress

The women`s movement became a mobilising force among patriotic and progressive fighters for liberation.

Comrade Maxeke is also known for having inspired other leaders within the ANC. One such leader is former ANC President the Rev Zac Mahabane.

Charlotte Maxeke is said to have been the most decisive early political influence upon the Rev Zac Mahabane.

Reverend Mahabane met Charlotte Maxeke in Cape Town in 1916. Reports state that comrade Maxeke was already an influential national figure by then, in demand for speaking at a range of meetings.

It was after listening to some of Charlotte Maxeke`s speeches in Cape Town that Reverend Mahabane, some seven years her junior, decided in 1917 that his calling as a man of the cloth required also an active involvement in politics.

In that year, he joined the Cape African Congress, which was the regional branch of the South African Native National Congress.

In 1919 Mahabane was chosen as President of the Cape Congress. His work in the Cape Congress was noted by African leaders elsewhere in the country, and in 1924 he was elected as the third President-General of the national body which had changed its name in 1923 to the African National Congress.

The role of Charlotte Maxeke in developing this leader of the ANC must not be forgotten.

She was an eloquent speaker, a unifier and a true revolutionary. She understood that the primary function of the liberation struggle was to carry out the political tasks of the revolution and also to develop others.

In one of her popular addresses called "Social Conditions of African Women and Girls", delivered in 1930 at the conference of European and Bantu Christian Student Association held at Fort Hare University, Comrade Maxeke said:

"If you definitely and earnestly set out to lift women and children up in the social life of the Bantu, you will find the men will benefit, and thus the whole community, both white and black..."

As a Christian, she was also firm about the need for the teachings of Christianity to be reflected in the lives of those who practised it, especially the oppressors.

She said; "What we want is more cooperation and friendship between the two races, and more definite display of real Christianity to help us in the solving of these riddles. Let us try to make our Christianity practical" (Maxeke, in *Legacy of Freedom*, 2005: 51).

Comrades,

We are celebrating a great African leader, a woman of extra-ordinary intellect, diligence and patriotism.

Illustrious leaders of the ANC have spoken eloquently and have waxed lyrical about the person of Comrade Maxeke.

Professor D.D. T Jabavu, then the leading academic scholar at Fort Hare University made the following pertinent observation about Comrade Maxeke:

"Throughout all her life she has been engaged in efforts of a patriotic character on behalf of the aboriginal races of Africa, these efforts entailing herculean tasks every time.

"The League of Bantu Women which she was responsible for starting, was a wonderful movement that stirred the imagination of our people and unmistakably infused a widened public spirit among our women-folk throughout South Africa with results still traceable right to the present time".

In one of his writings in the publication *Imvo Zabantsundu*, ZK Matthews described Ms Maxeke as follows.

"Charlotte Maxeke was a stout lady with a striking face, with sharp penetrating eyes which could strike terror into those who crossed words with her and yet be gentle and kind to those who needed her sympathy". ("Mrs Charlotte M. Maxeke: Defender of Women`s Rights", September 9, 1961).

The great African-American intellectual, WEB du Bois, wrote the following about Charlotte Maxeke in the Preface to Alfred B Xuma`s Biographical sketch:

"I regard Mrs Maxeke as a pioneer in one of the greatest of human causes, working in extraordinarily difficult circumstances to lead a people, in the face of prejudice, not only against her race but against her sex.

"I think that what Mrs Maxeke has accomplished should encourage all men, especially those of African descent."

Most of the ideals and the values that Ms Maxeke stood for, constituted the cornerstone of the Women`s Charter, which was adopted by the Federation of South African Women in Johannesburg, in April 1954.

As we celebrate the centenary of the liberation struggle, we acknowledge and praise the contribution of this pioneer and founder of the ANC Women`s League.

We celebrate this woman who allowed no boundaries to be set for her, as she lived her life to the fullest, in pursuit of freedom for all and personal achievement.

She dedicated her intellect to the service of her people.

Long after her death on 16 October 1939, Comrade Maxeke`s name is revered and continues to occupy a pride of place within the African National Congress.

In honour of her memory, especially her unrelenting drive to acquire education, the ANC Women`s League named a nursery school in Morogorogo, Tanzania as the Charlotte Maxeke Child Care Centre.

The Gauteng Government also boasts a Charlotte Maxeke hospital, which is enjoined to provide as excellent a service as its namesake did in her service to humanity.

Today Maitland Street on which she led the 1913 women`s march, has been named Charlotte Maxeke Street, a befitting tribute to this great South African leader.

As a collective, we must emulate the exemplary leadership of Mama Maxeke by building a national united front that strives to attain the objectives of the National Democratic Revolution.

Like the women of 1913 that she so ably led, we must declare that we shall not rest until we have won for our children a life free of poverty and inequality.

In her honour, we must continue to open new paths for women and enable them to break new ground in leadership.

We are proud as a country for example, to have produced the first woman Chairperson of the African Union Commission, our own Minister Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma. Charlotte Maxeke, who believed that a woman`s place is everywhere, must be smiling in approval.

We are also proud of increasing our numbers of women in parliament during each election, women in cabinet and also the fact that out of nine premiers, five are women.

We also have for the first time, a woman as a national police commissioner.

Women also hold weighty portfolios in Cabinet such as defence, public service and administration, communications, energy, mineral resources to name just a few.

The empowerment we seek naturally goes beyond leadership positions for women. It must include the improvement of the quality of life of all women, especially the poor and unemployed.

Comrades, as we honour this selfless fighter for social justice, freedom and democracy, let us commit ourselves to preserving Comrade Maxeke`s legacy by vigorously pursuing the social and economic transformation agenda.

She was so concerned about unemployment and poverty that she established a recruitment agency to enable people, and women in particular, to find jobs.

Let us protect children at all times, which was one of Ms Maxeke`s passions. She was a vigorous fighter for the rights of children especially those in conflict with the law.

Most importantly comrades, let us learn from Comrade Charlotte the value of education, selflessness and empowerment of others.

In a memorable Presidential address to the National Council of African Women, Comrade Maxeke made her powerful remarks about putting others first before oneself.

She said;

"This work is not for yourselves — kill that spirit of self, and do not live above your people, but live with them. If you can rise, bring someone with you".

Indeed, if you can rise, bring someone with you. Her words echo what women stand for. They develop others, they develop communities. This is a trait we will be celebrating as we mark women`s month.

Comrades,

Against the backdrop of celebrating Comrade Charlotte Maxeke, it is my honour and privilege to launch Women`s Month on behalf of the ANC Women`s League and indeed on behalf of the ANC as a whole.

Malibongwe!

Amandla!