



SPEAKING NOTES FOR EXECUTIVE CHAIRPERSON
DR SUNSHINE MYENDE

SHE IN ACTION
WESTVILLE CAMPUS, UKZN

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SPEAKING NOTES BY THE EXECUTIVE

CHAIRPERSON OF THE NYDA ON THE OCCASION OF THE SHE IN ACTION

ENGAGEMENT – *Keynote Address* | ±10 minutes

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To the University Leadership in the room,
To the student leaders present,
And especially to the young women this programme was built for.
Good morning

Thank you for having me, and thank you for choosing to spend part of your morning here rather than somewhere easier.

There's something right about having this conversation inside a university. This is where you're not just being trained for a career - you're forming your sense of what's possible for you. Some of you in this room will one day sit on the panel that decides who gets hired. You'll set strategy, allocate budgets, decide whose ideas move forward, decide who gets sponsored and who gets overlooked. So this talk isn't really about the leader you'll become one day. It's about what you'll do with the power once you actually have it.

Let's skip past the question of whether women can lead. We've answered that, many times over, in this country and everywhere else. The harder question is whether we've actually examined what we mean by "leader." Who do we picture when we hear that word? Whose directness reads as authority, and whose reads as difficult? Whose ambition do we call impressive, and whose do we quietly ask to justify itself?

That's where stereotypes do their real work. We tell ourselves women are collaborative and men are decisive, women are emotional and men are tough, as if any of that were fixed rather than learned. Then we use those stories, often without noticing, to decide who looks like leadership material. A direct woman gets called difficult; an equally direct man gets called decisive. A woman who builds consensus gets called soft; a man who does the same gets called consultative. An ambitious



woman gets asked to explain herself in ways an equally ambitious man never is. Nobody registers any of this as bias in the moment. That's precisely why it survives - it feels normal.

And it shows up in hard numbers, not just impressions. Statistics South Africa's most recent labour force survey found that only 6.8% of employed women hold managerial positions, against 10.7% of men - and this despite women actually being proportionally *more* represented than men in professional occupations. So the credentials are there. The qualifications are there. What's missing is the conversion into managerial authority.

In our own sector, a 2026 study tracking leadership across 26 South African universities found real movement - women's share of leadership positions rose from 23.7% in 2014 to nearly 40% in 2024. That's genuine progress, and it deserves to be acknowledged.

But look at where that progress actually landed. Deputy vice-chancellor roles saw dramatic gains. Vice-chancellor roles - the very top, where the biggest decisions get made - moved from roughly 17% to under 27% over that same decade. So the closer you get to where power actually sits, the slower the change gets.

That gap is the actual argument. There's a difference between being present in a room and having influence in it. Between a seat at the table and a hand on what gets decided there.

Policy is trying to close that gap. Since 2025, the amended Employment Equity Act has set binding five-year targets across eighteen sectors, reaching all the way up to top management. That matters - what gets measured can be checked, and what can be checked can be held to account.

But a target can only tell you whether a number moved. It can't tell you whether the culture did. It can't tell you whether women are being trusted with the assignments that build real credibility, whether informal networks have opened up, or whether women are just being handed a title and left to work out the rest alone. We cannot mistake numerical transformation for cultural transformation.



Audre Lorde put the deeper problem more sharply than I can: "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." Taken seriously, that means we can't only teach women to navigate institutions built on old assumptions about who gets to hold authority. At some point, we have to ask whether the institutions themselves need rebuilding.

So I want to resist putting this whole job on women's shoulders - be more confident, network harder, negotiate better. Those things help. Mentorship helps, sponsorship helps, skills-building helps. But none of it replaces institutional responsibility. If promotions run on informal networks, ask who's actually in them. If certain fields are still quietly understood as "not really for women," ask how that idea keeps reproducing itself. If caregiving keeps landing on women by default, ask what your workplace is doing about that. And if a woman gets penalised for showing the exact authority leadership requires of her, the problem was never her confidence. It was the standard she was being measured against.

To the young women in this room specifically: don't let stereotypes become the ruler you measure yourself against. You don't have to get louder, colder, or less yourself to be taken seriously. Leadership doesn't have one personality - and it definitely isn't gendered. But there is another part of this conversation that I think we have to be honest about, particularly as we encourage more women to occupy positions of authority.

Challenging stereotypes does not mean that being a woman in leadership gives us permission to abandon the disciplines of good leadership. Leadership is not bullying. It is not insisting that everything must be done your way simply because you hold the position. It is not ignoring advice, dismissing people who disagree with you or treating protocol as something that applies to everyone except you. And it certainly is not using the struggle for women's representation as a justification for poor leadership. Sometimes leadership is quiet. Sometimes it is knowing when to listen rather than speak, when to consult rather than command, and when to allow your presence, your consistency and the quality of your work to establish your authority. Real authority does not need to constantly announce itself.



And I think women in leadership have an additional responsibility to one another. We know what it means to enter spaces where women before us may have had to fight simply to be taken seriously. We should therefore be careful that, once we have authority, we do not become the very people who make the path harder for the women coming behind us. Being a woman leader should not mean becoming harder on other women to prove that we belong in the room. It should mean understanding the weight that other women may be carrying, creating room for them to grow, correcting without humiliating, holding people accountable without breaking them, and being willing to nurture the next generation of women leaders. We can be sisters' keepers without lowering standards. We can demand excellence without destroying people's dignity. We should never become the reason another woman begins to doubt her worth, loses her confidence or walks away from leadership believing that she has to become someone else to survive it.

But don't settle for just learning to fit in, either. Aim higher. Aim to help build places where women stop having to choose between being respected and being themselves.

Because most of you will hold some form of power one day - on a panel, in a promotion decision, deciding who leads a project, who gets sponsored, who gets a second chance after a mistake. In that moment, gender equality stops being a principle you agree with in theory. It becomes a decision you make about someone else's opportunity. Will you reproduce the standard you inherited, or will you have the courage to question it?

More than a century ago, Charlotte Maxeke became the first Black South African woman to earn a university degree, then came home and built the Bantu Women's League, spending her life opening doors for the women coming up behind her. Her advice still holds, and it's the best closing line I know: "if you rise, bring someone with you."

That's what leadership without limitations actually means. Not just women getting into rooms that used to be closed to them, but changing what happens once we're



inside them - so that the next woman
through the door doesn't have to fight the same fight all over again.

Thank you.