



Key note addressed at the Banulacht International Women's Day Conference Liepollo Lebohang Pheko

8th of March 2006 - Dublin

It is an absolute honour to be in the company of all of you friends, sisters, mothers, daughters and warrior women to celebrate Women's Day. It is exciting to be here because such occasions offer us the opportunity to hear voices telling stories of women's daily lives who resist, who overcome and who refuse to turn away from their wildest dreams and most audacious expectations of life and I thank Banulacht for facilitating the wonderful opportunity to be among you.

The story of **Me** is a simple one. My paternal grandmother was a teacher, widowed in the 1960s and left to watch the huge inheritance of land and livestock in her family erode by the apartheid regime. Added to this were the strongly patriarchal structures that ultimately colluded to appropriate her birthright. No sophisticated machinations between her and her uncles, brothers and other men of power could assuage the inevitable injustice. With this erosion came the loss of indigenous knowledge passed on from one generation to the next, and the strong sense of self-determination that goes with this. Despite this she intrepidly travelled across the country and crossed the border to her homeland Lesotho to Swaziland many times to visit her family and most significantly to visit my parents in exile. For nearly thirty years she endured onslaughts of interrogation and intimidation at the hands of the Apartheid Security machinery but never revealed a single detail about her son's whereabouts or political activities. In her later years ill health and age prevented her from moving as far and as fast as she used to however, in 1990, aged 87, she made a trip from Kwa-Zulu to the Eastern Cape to see her favourite daughter in law and her last born-my mother and I. It was the last time we saw her.

My maternal grandmother had ten children and was left to raise them alone having been widowed at the age of 33 with no visible income and a grade 3 education. Unlike my paternal Grandmother, she did not travel much beyond South Africa and scarcely left her home province. Despite this she lived a large life filled with achievement and vigour. She built a church in her home and by Divine anointing this structure was the only one to survive terrible floods in later years. She was one of the first women to sit on the village council and make her voice heard and influence important decisions. She steadfastly refused to incriminate her exiled activist daughter and son in law when questioned and threatened by the police over the decades. No body has been able to explain how they collectively produced seven teachers, three nurses and two engineers, a photographer and a

journalist, among their own children and several lawyers, nurses, a few more engineers, teachers, lecturers, researchers and IT specialists among their grandchildren.

Significantly two of their children met and married in 1957- my mother a teacher and my father then a journalist. They were both captivated by the growing liberation fervour and joined the Pan Africanist Congress of Azania [PAC] a movement that had broken away from the ANC in 1955 because of profound and remaining disagreement over the land issue. My mother joined in her **own** right and was and remains an activist in **her own** right. She remains a staunch anti-war, anti imperialism activist. My father was jailed as a result of his political activity and branded as a terrorist by the State police and some members of my parent's church who passed comments about the hazards facing those who lead double lives with "one foot in the church and the other in the world". Several friends and supporters of my parents' cause walked out of the service in solidarity after the objectionable remarks. My parents' quest for liberation led them to flee the country to a place called 'exile', my mother expecting a child. They trekked to Swaziland, former 'Rhodesia', Zambia, Mozambique, Kenya and eventually the UK and the US with several more prison stints and adversities along the way.

The story of **Me** is closely linked and interspersed with the story of **She** and **We**. It's a simple story of the daily struggle of resistance against violence in the household that depletes us of our own sovereignty. It is the violence in the workplace that still consigns us to less pay for more hours of work, violence arising from conflicts that displace our families and social fibre leaving us to weave the pieces back together with fragmented memories. It includes the violence of images in the media that reduce us to mere objects of lust and for Southern women the images that objectify us as less, as other, as primitive leaving me seething with anger. It is embodied in the violence upon our self-knowledge that renders our wisdom and intellect inaudible. This gathering is a moment of connection to remind us that we are a movement, that we do have power and are extremely capable of being heard.

The dominant human rights discourse speaks of the idea of citizenship related to access to health, education, work, refuge in times of war, the right to associate with whom we wish, to articulate our aspirations and to claim our place in every sphere of life. As many women grapple with obstructions in accessing these basic rights we are forced to ask '**what is citizenship**' for the Woman? For we who have been dispossessed of our land, removed from our ancient abodes, invaded in our bodies and displaced in social structures -what or where are we? Are we formless people caught in a twilight world of junior or quasi citizenship that can only be fully qualified depending on our marital status, financial standing or the ability to negotiate complex social power relations?

The moment has arrived to illuminate all the parts of ourselves we have kept concealed in fear, doubt and ambiguity in this twilight world. As someone who has moved from state to state over years, the sense of home and identity is one that resonates. For the refugees and migrants moving between countries, the neo classical construction of rights as related to citizenship rings hollow. As women we need to deconstruct and reconstruct our own definitions of citizenship that enables us to access our full humanity and experience full citizenship and all its benefits under every circumstance.

Working for an organisation that addresses trade issues through a gender lens, these socio-economic rights are central. We are living in an economic system that removes women's social reproduction i.e. caring for children and the elderly, doing chores, gathering fuel and water away from any importance rendering it invisible and insignificant. This economic system chooses instead to focus on the pursuit of profits at any cost including jeopardizing health, safety and lives of women who work agonizingly long hours in factories and production centres across the South and in parts of the North. Some of the factories and sweatshops that existed just a hundred years ago in the North have moved but many remain, hidden, reconfigured but still exploitative. The competition between the north and south as goods are exported or dumped in the South intricately and indelibly links us as women whether we are producers or consumers - often both. The evidence that we are connected globally is on the tags in our clothing that may say 'Made in China' or 'Made in India' or the household items produced in Korea or our plate of rice imported from Sri Lanka or the coffee we had at breakfast from Kenya. Many of these transactions place us in artificial competition with each other and at odds with our own value systems. In South Africa for example we produce what we do not consume and import lifestyles that we cannot afford. We have thus begun to believe the falsehood that we are simple fragments and that our stories are disconnected from each other's. It is not true. Survival in this rat race locates us at a place where, more than ever, our sisterhood and kinship should not be eroded or shaken.

GENTA's work is inspired by the knowledge that our lived experiences are part of contributing to the global economy. When we buy maize instead of rice, buy vegetables instead of meat, when we use gas or wood instead of electricity, when we walk instead of taking a bus, we are making strategic economic choices. More often these decisions are imposed not out of personal taste but severe economic limitations. Me, She and We are engaged in these choices all the time. The choices are often unfair, humiliating and absolutely immoral based on the assumptions that we are deserving of less, that our humanity is less worthy of honour and that our social conditions don't deserve attention beyond the generic umbrella of "Women's issues", "Gender Desk" or "Equality Unit". None of these voice our full humanity or adequately advance our citizenship as women. This gathering is the opportunity to celebrate our victories, our successes and the power of surviving onslaughts on our "personhood".

One of the things that propels me is the yearning to leave a legacy for my children that does not place them in confinement of stereotypes, of being called tom boys, of being thought too loud, too quiet, too aggressive, too forward, too ambitious or too anything other than themselves as God created them to be. A world that enables them to sing their songs loudly and unapologetically, a world where they can leave the handprints of their uniqueness.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission [TRC] process in South Africa was vaunted as an opportunity to voice injustice, pain, suffering and ultimately forgiveness. Instead many voices were muffled and yet again the notion of full or authentic citizenship remained unresolved as perpetrators of the apartheid genocide and liberation activists were placed on par in the name of “democracy” and contrived “unity”. To this day the voices of the hundreds of incarcerated African freedom fighters and combatants are unheard and their pleas to enjoy the fruits [albeit bitter], of their struggle are disregarded and throttled. For the women combatants and She-roes of the struggle their voice has often been reduced to one of shame and their contribution isolated in the wilderness of distorted history and skewed notions of femininity as though their contribution were a peripheral or insignificant thing.

I have turned a full circle in this life and now stand at the centre of my existence believing home to be where I am alive, where I breathe, where I walk, where I grow, where I dance and where my being is at rest, my potential nurtured and my voice enabled loudly and proudly. I remain an African woman and no factor of geography or geo-politics or war or calamity or other circumstances that often conspire to tamper with our identity, sense of home or the classical definitions of citizenship will change that. Home is a choice that resides within me as much as it is a place. As such when I hear my daughter singing the national anthem and singing school songs in a language I will loathe to my last breath - Afrikaans - it challenges me to allow her to construct her own sense of identity and her own citizenship. For me Afrikaans represents the language of oppression, of hatred, of the blood of the valiant children who died in June 1976 protesting its use in schools. It represents the Azanian holocaust. To my untainted, golden girl it may mean something different - merely a sound, a word or a song incidental even to her world. My daughter is an African child who speaks and voices in her home language and understands her cultural heritage. However it will be for her to navigate the complex dimensions thrust upon us - often uncomfortably and unwillingly - since 1994.

It is critical that we dismantle what He or They have said about Me and She and We. As articulated by wise women: “We have to reclaim ourselves so that together we can reclaim our power of love and courage”. The poet Audre Lordes implores and incites us to urgently challenge what is said and thought about us as women, to change the weapons of violence and exclusion, competition between those perceived to be weaker and stronger or inferior and superior, civilised or uncivilised

- male and patriarchal notions of power. I would add to her call by saying that **We** have to interrupt the conversations that have pitted us against each other and crash into the meetings that have reached preposterous conclusions about us in our absence. We have to rewrite our stories into Herstory. We have to reclaim ourselves.

Call to Me, She and Weⁱ

The enemies of self doubt *and distorted self image and crushed self esteem and skewed body perceptions, and all the debris piled upon us by our diverse and brutal circumstances* sit safely ensconced within our minds, within our hearts; none of us escapes their clutches *without a hard and bloody fight*. We have to forge new and untainted definitions *of womanhood from all our mothers for all our daughters. To hear our voices from deep within returning us to the instructions of the Creator as guardians of the Mother called Earth.* The drumbeat and rhythm making us dance the dance of creation of ancient cultures now almost decimated.

We must speak to the ones yet to come about the things we have seen and heard. We must tell them to rise beyond the half truth and despair of lives lived beneath our selves. Our bodies must be claimed back as sacred temples and our essence revered as the breath of life.

Our shared tears are a balm that cleanses the hurt, the devastation, the loneliness, the fear, the shame and the myths.

Let us lift our voices in celebration of the divinity within each of us, in affirmation of each other, songs in every tongue reaching every star and alerting the world that we do live, we do rise, we will conquer yet.

**Partly adapted from poem read by Pregs Govender at Courts of Women on Racism 2001.
Italics denote author's own composition**

