

Webinar Tribute to Gertrude Ntiti Shope by Dr Naledi Pandor, Minister of International Relations and Cooperation: 27 August 2020

August is celebrated as Women's Month in South Africa. It is a time to honour and highlight the enormous courage and contribution of women to the struggle against apartheid and to acknowledge their self-sacrifice, commitment and high political ideals. This is a tribute to a life well-lived dedicated to Mma Gertrude Shope.

There is much to celebrate in South Africa's progress with the difficult challenges of gender equality. Changes in access to education, to political office, to non-traditional careers and many new enterprise fields are all evident. They are a result of the principles and values that have defined the life of Ma Shope.

The name Gertrude Shope belongs to a rare breed of women whose impact on the political progress of our country is yet to be fully appreciated. This is a leader who has pursued the vision of freedom set out by her political movement, the African National Congress (ANC) and her country, South Africa, with such distinctions that her narrative is almost mythic.

Her political activism within the historical agency of the ANC emanated from shared values and objectives with the latter political formation, not only about what was wrong in the society into which she was born, but also, about how to correct such wrongs through re-envisioning a united, democratic, non-racial, non-sexist and just society.

Ma Shope fully deserves the tribute we present today. She is a humble yet firm leader who has been fearless in pursuit of justice for the vulnerable and equality for woman and girls.

Last week many South Africans paid tribute to her on the occasion of her 95th birthday. We were very pleased that women and men, young and old shared their appreciation for her indelible contribution to South Africa and the world.

Her self-effacing modesty masks a never-say die spirit. It is a spirit that defied the odds, sustained her fight for liberation and animated her contribution to the blossoming freedom and democracy that flourished after April 1994.

A warrior against gender oppression, a warrior against racial oppression and a warrior against the oppression of workers, Ma Shope lived a life in the service of all that which was ideally lovely in the domain of human experience.

During her lifetime she has carried out these exacting roles with exemplary fortitude and rare commitment.

Equipped with a perceptive mind, she developed a sharpened grasp of the multi-dimensional nature of oppression, ably dissecting the underlying nexus between racial, gender and class oppression that shaped South Africa's history, defined our very notion of being human and bequeathed to us the baneful legacy that continues to toxify post-apartheid political imaginary.

Very early on in our history when the reigning social mystifications legitimated gender inequality even within what was supposed to be progressive liberation politics, Ma Shope refused to concede ground. She knew that gender was a social construct, knew no colour, and was maintained by legitimising mythology which served entrenched patriarchal interests.

In this sense she is among the pioneers who not only fought against the socio-political practice of gender erasure but also, posited both the possibility and desirability of gender equality as a presupposition of the very definition of the idea of freedom. She therefore resolved to breakdown the invidious social mould that sought to define women as perpetual underlings.

Her prosecution of the liberation struggle was in turn shaped by this macro-understanding of the historical architecture of South Africa's oppression.

Few are women and men who have served the noble cause of liberation of humankind for sixty-six odd years with such impeccable dedication, both within and outside their country of birth, without ever putting a single foot wrong.

She continued to be an avid exponent of gender agenda and workers' rights during her exile travails, during which she lived all over the world, including Prague, Botswana, Tanzania, Czechoslovakia, Zambia, and Nigeria.

Her deep impulses for gender equality took her struggles all over the world, including Nairobi Women's Meeting to which she led the ANC delegation. This deeper understanding of the intersection of oppression enabled her to work for the World Federation of Trade Unions, allowing her to develop an acute international perspective of the workers' exploitation.

A product of this turbulent history, she has emerged from it a well-rounded revolutionary, who would continue to enrich the human experience after the watershed April 1994 democratic breakthrough. As a Parliamentarian, she served the democratic government with honour, while championing the cause of gender equality by heading up the ANC Women's League between 1991 and 1993.

Even in retirement, Ma Shope exudes an air of majesty and dignity as a sage of the age belonging to the same illustrious historical galaxy of revolutionaries that include Charlotte Maxeke, Ruth First, Fatima Meer, Hellen Joseph, Sophia de Bryn, Ruth Mompati, Lillian Ngoyi, and many more.

As I conclude this tribute, let me say to you Ma Shope: thank you for all that you have been, done and said for the oppressed people of the world, be they workers, black people or women. On this women's month, we thank you as women for insisting on our visibility on the agenda of history. I believe every celebration of women's month is an ode to you and your splendid generation.

When the definitive history of the nobility of the struggle against the oppression of humanity by another is finally committed to paper, the name Gertrude Ntiti Shope will enjoy pride of place in it!!!

I thank you