

The Human Rights Institute of South Africa (HURISA) joins voices from all corners of the world to commemorate International Women's Day.

International Women's Day is celebrated on 8 March globally. The global UN Women theme for International Women's Day 2021 is "Women in Leadership: Achieving an equal future in the COVID-19 world" the theme is a focal point in the movement for women's rights and commemorates the social, economic, cultural, and political achievements of women in shaping the history of their countries and community. This theme also aligns with the 65th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women, "women in public life, equal participation in decision making and the flagship Generation Equality Campaign, which calls for women's rights in decision-making in all areas of life, equal pay, equal sharing of unpaid care work and domestic work, and end all forms of violence against women and girls, and health-care services that respond to their needs.

Despite ordinary women unveiling their capacities and being at the forefront of the COVID-19 crisis as healthcare workers, women human rights defenders, woman activists, care givers, community organisers, innovators and scientists still face challenges in being part of leadership and decision making. Men outpace women in leadership roles across every sector in the world from corporate, non-profit, government, education, medicine, military and religion due to gender based stereotypes influenced by the cultural value dimensions and structural barriers. In South Africa there is enabling legislation such as Chapter 2 of the 1996 Constitution of the Republic of South Africa that recognizes the enjoyment of equal human rights for all. However women continue to experience gender based discrimination because of the patriarchal society that wrongly portray men as the only ones who are able to lead and this has limited their ability to exercise their rights and freedoms. As the COVID-19 global gripped the world, it soon became clear that COVID-19 exacerbated the existing vulnerabilities of women, LGBTIQ+ women, displaced migrants, refugee, people with disabilities and elderly person. The crisis highlighted the increase risk in:

- Gender-based violence and femicide
- Unemployment
- Greater burden of domestic and care work
- Reduced financial independence and future prospects
- Frontline health workforce
- Reduced access to health services and exclusion from potential COVID-19 treatments.
- Police brutality
- Harmful cultural practices

In light of these disturbing atrocities, we are able to hold onto hope that change can be achieved by electing more women in national and global policy spaces. Include more female voices at every table where decisions are being made to create a government that is gender responsive in achieving gender equality. In South Africa we acknowledge Phumzile Mlambo – Ngcuka who was the first Deputy President of South Africa from 2005-2008. In the UN Women statement, she emphasised the need for women's representation that reflect all women and girls in all their diversity and abilities, and across all cultural, social, economic and political situations without being intimidated into silence and submissions. Another example that has been set for young black women was the inauguration of the first (1st) Black, South Asian American and first woman vice president Kamala Harris. This it to say we have come a long way to give up now, I quote Shirley Chisholm the first Black US Congresswoman once said:" if they don't give you a seat at the table, bring a folding chair." It is time to encourage young women and girls to not limit themselves but to claim their space in leadership and decision-

making positions. We call for young feminists across the world to embrace the unlimited possibilities that this life may bring.

This year on International Women's Day we choose to challenge systematic barriers and inequality. We choose to challenge poverty. We choose to challenge unemployment. What do you choose to challenge?

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