

NOTES BY THE EXECUTIVE CHAIR OF THE NYDA DR SUNSHINE MYENDE AT WOMEN'S P20 PARLIAMENT

Main theme: Redistribution of growth and development to women

Sub-theme: Advancing Women's Economic Empowerment through Inclusive Policy Reform

13 August 2025

Chairperson of the session

Esteemed guests

1. Economic inclusion and the care economy

I was excited yesterday when one of the presenters mentioned the Asian Tigers. We can and must learn from what is usually termed the *Southeast Asian economic miracle* — a powerful demonstration that it is possible to turn the tide of an economy through deliberate, strategic action. In the context of today's discussion, it's clear that real change for women, particularly young women in South Africa, will require transformative government policies.

Just yesterday, a colleague referenced the work of economist Ha-Joon Chang, who challenges the notion that markets should operate free from government intervention. He reminds us that the world's most successful economies — the very superpowers we often look to — achieved their status through robust, proactive state involvement.

This perspective is critical when we think about economic inclusion and, more broadly, the gender agenda. If we are serious about empowering women, we must ask: how can government be used as a vehicle for transformative change? What policies can be implemented — not someday, but now — to improve the material and social conditions of women across this country?

Chair, women's participation in the economy is significantly hindered by unpaid labour, particularly care work. These essential services, largely carried out by women, remain undervalued and unrecognised in economic planning.

In South Africa, women perform the majority of household and caregiving duties. Due to entrenched gender roles and expectations, many women are unable to actively pursue formal employment, education, skills development, or entrepreneurial opportunities.

It is therefore paramount that care work be recognised as a critical economic sector. Policy intervention is essential—both in paid and unpaid care work. Measures such as funding childcare facilities (which admittedly is an ongoing program but there is room for improvement) and implementing flexible working arrangements can help redistribute caregiving responsibilities and expand women's access to economic development opportunities.

The quantification of unpaid caregiving or care work would further strengthen this reform. Studies have shown that, if monetised, such labour could amount to significant percentages of GDP. Importantly, any attempt to quantify care work must include an intersectional analysis, as the value and burden of care vary widely based on the different contexts women come from. This includes rural women, those in low- or no-income households, and the broader understanding that women are not a homogeneous group.

For example, during the NYDA induction last week, it was rightly asserted that when we design and implement programmes for young people, young women to be more specific, in rural areas, informal settlements, and townships, we must consider the complex realities they face — including caregiving responsibilities. The question we must ask is: how do we ensure that young women, who often need our services the most but also shoulder the burden of childcare, are not excluded from accessing these opportunities?

Quantifying the economic value of unpaid care work, which studies suggest could equate to several percentage points of GDP if monetized, would strengthen the case for such reforms. Intersectional analysis is vital, as rural women, low-income households, and women in informal employment face compounded barriers.

Chair, there is a clear gap that, if addressed, could contribute meaningfully to the economic development of young women. For example, in rural areas, townships, and informal settlements, training local women to become certified childcare workers could create jobs and help build a sustainable support system.

We must also consider measures to improve access and flexibility for young women — such as government-subsidised data and devices for online learning, transport support, or mobile services in remote areas where young people often travel long distances to access opportunities. These were among the key discussions at the NYDA, rooted in the understanding that young women are not a homogeneous group. It is our responsibility to recognise their complex lived realities and develop solutions that respond directly to their needs.

2. Climate justice and gendered resilience

At the NYDA, we have also discussed the importance of land access for young people — particularly young women. We recognise that agriculture is not only essential for food security but also plays a significant role in our economy. However, the conversation about land cannot be separated from the realities of climate change. How can young women effectively work the land under increasingly volatile weather conditions?

Climate change directly impacts the environment and critical factors such as food systems, water access, and the stability of agricultural communities. In particular, rural women and girls — who are often central to agricultural activities — are disproportionately affected by climate-related challenges such as floods, droughts, and biodiversity loss. These conditions threaten food security and increase the risk of poverty and displacement for this already vulnerable group.

Establishing a gender-responsive climate strategy is essential to address these intersecting challenges. Such strategies must mandate the inclusion of women in decision-making processes — from community-based initiatives to national and global climate governance structures. Investments in women-led initiatives within renewable energy, agriculture, and

climate-resilient infrastructure can create dual outcomes: advancing environmental protection while empowering women economically.

Additionally, expanding access to public-private partnerships, microcredit schemes, and cooperatives can equip women to become leaders in sustainable development — rather than victims of climate disruption.

3. Bridging the digital divide

The rapid growth of the global digital economy presents both risks and opportunities for women. It offers a path toward empowerment, yet also exposes the persistent gender digital divide in South Africa. Women — particularly those in rural areas and low-income communities — often have limited access to the internet, digital literacy, and meaningful participation in STEM sectors. Without targeted intervention, these barriers risk deepening already existing economic inequalities.

Bridging this gap requires multi-level action, including affordable internet access, cost-effective connectivity tools, and digital skills development. Partnerships between government, the private sector, and civil society are critical — they can create opportunities for women entrepreneurs, promote equality in the digital space, and ensure safety online. For example, at the NYDA, we are currently exploring the possibility of a zero-rated app — because the first step is accessibility.

Recently, in Sandton, I spoke about Sweep South — an app developed by a young woman that offers cleaning and household services. It has been commercially successful and has won numerous awards. Sweep South is proof that there is a gap in the market — and a space where we can support young women to thrive.

However, intersectional barriers persist in the digital divide. It is essential to address linguistic differences, cultural diversity, and other accessibility barriers. Doing so will ensure that digital strategies are truly inclusive — and that even the most marginalised women and girls are not left behind.

4. Health equity as a foundation for empowerment

Persistent gaps in reproductive health, mental health, and maternal care continue to undermine women's full participation in socio-economic life. Addressing these gaps and ensuring women's inclusion in strategic decision-making on health equity is essential for their empowerment. Key challenges—including cost barriers, stigma, and limited access due to geographic location—are especially severe in rural areas. Prioritizing a gender-responsive universal health care system that integrates reproductive and mental health as core services is critical. The adoption of digital health solutions, such as telemedicine and mobile applications, offers opportunities to expand access efficiently across diverse regions. However, implementation must address rural literacy barriers, data privacy, and cultural sensitivities to guarantee equitable benefits for all women. Strengthening both community-based health systems and national digital health strategies through coordinated alignment will be vital.

Conclusion:

Of paramount importance for gender activists is the recognition that women between the ages of 35 and 40 are often overlooked. With unemployment at an all-time high, many women spend ten to fifteen years out of the workforce, and by the time they reach 35-40, they are deemed unsuitable or less preferred in the job market. These women must also be included in our focus. In my organization, we intentionally classify them as young women to ensure their representation in our work.

Furthermore, Chair, we must prioritize gender-responsive budgeting. As a colleague noted yesterday, APPs and KPIs should explicitly incorporate initiatives that address gender issues in our communities. Our response to the crisis—where women disproportionately experience poverty and hunger—must be deliberate and sustained. Every department must answer this call, and every employee must recognize their responsibility in this effort.

Furthermore, Chair a holistic, intersectional approach is essential to advance inclusion for women and children. This must address economic empowerment, climate resilience, health equity, and digitalization—key pillars of women's empowerment. Progress in one area can positively influence others: digitalization can enhance climate adaptation skills; health equity

can boost productivity; and reforms in the care economy can increase participation in both the digital and green sectors. A clear national strategy should integrate these pillars within South Africa’s development agenda, aligned with G20 and SDG commitments and informed by feminist policy principles. This requires coordinated policy reform that prioritizes women’s participation and ensures sustained investment throughout planning, coordination, and implementation stages.

Theme	Statistic
Digital Divide	14% women are less likely to use mobile internet than man, in South Africa.
	In Africa, 32 % of women use the internet vs 42% of men that use the internet (2023).
Digital divide – smartphones	49% of smartphone internet usage in South Africa was women vs 51% were men (2021).
Care work economy.	Globally, women spend about 4.2 hours/day on unpaid care and domestic work vs. 1.7 hours for men.
Health Equity	After U.S. aid cuts in early 2025, maternal viral load testing in South Africa dropped by 21.3%, and early infant diagnostic testing declined by 19.9%.
Digital Economy (Developing World)	Among female entrepreneurs in developing countries, 45% lacked regular internet access due to cost and connectivity barriers; women were 15% less likely than men to use mobile internet.