

Address by the Minister of Science and Technology, Naledi Pandor MP, at the opening ceremony of the Third World Organization for Women in Science (TWOWS) General Assembly and Conference, Beijing International Convention Center (BICC), Beijing, China 27, June 2009 between 15:00-17:00pm

Lu YongXiang, President, Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS); Xin Fang, Member of the CAS Presidium; Kaiser Jamil, President, Third World Organization for Women in Science (TWOWS); Academy of Sciences for the Developing World (TWAS), Elsevier Foundation, Swedish International Development Agency (Sida), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Distinguished Scientists, Ladies and Gentlemen.

I was delighted to accept the invitation to address you this morning.

China's phenomenal economic growth serves as a source of inspiration for much of Africa. It gives African countries renewed hope that we too can lift our citizens out of poverty.

China's economic transformation has been associated with increased investment in science, technology, and engineering.

Chinese President Hu Jintao is an engineer; Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao is an engineer. Almost every single Chinese official in a position of real power is a university graduate with an engineering degree.

The government officials who head state-owned mines are engineers. Government officials who lead commodity companies are engineers. Government officials who manage factories are engineers.

Enter the office of any head of any Chinese state-owned entity, and you will find an engineer.

Yet he will in all probability be a man.

Even here, and I am sure most of the developing world, women's scientific skills and abilities are still underutilised.

Women are still under-represented in the fields of science and technology.

Women are still under-represented in top research managerial positions.

Women are still under-represented in science, technology, and innovation policymaking.

The challenge for Africa, and the developing world, is to ensure that the gender imbalance in the practice of science, technology and innovation activities is addressed.

None of us here underestimate the importance of science, technology, and innovation for socio-economic development in both the developed and developing world. The involvement of women in STI activities is critical in ensuring that the full diversity of a nation is utilised in providing expertise and in contributing to the development of nations.

There is increased international activity in this area with many organisations devoting attention to increasing the participation of women and girls in science.

In Africa, our adoption of an African plan for the advancement of Science and Technology, and our efforts to enhance the quality of higher education illustrate our commitment to advance Science, Technology and Innovation.

At the international level, South Africa supports the Third World Organization for Women in Science – Gender Advisory Board – Academy of Sciences for the Developing World (TWOWS-GAB-TWAS) international campaign to promote gender, science, technology and innovation – GenderInSITE.

This campaign encourages increased collaboration among key stakeholders and is exploring how to encourage women to become scientists and technologists.

TWOWS promotes greater participation of women scientists and technologists in the development process of their countries and in the international community.

I call on TWOWS to take a lead in service to their countries and regions to continually make a difference in this area.

I note with enthusiasm that the 2011 theme of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) at the UN Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW) is "Access and participation of women and girls to education, training, science and technology, including for the promotion of women's equal access to full employment and decent work".

TWOWS members should connect to their national CSW representatives and commissions to provide expertise and information on this issue so that it addresses the critical issues in this area.

The Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) and the African Union have also set up platforms that seek to increase the participation of women scientists in the regions development.

TWOWS has pledged to support the SADC Women in Science Platform and South Africa looks forward to collaborating with TWOWS in implementing the activities of the platform.

It is, however, critical that country-specific challenges are addressed nationally.

In South Africa, we have been promoting women in S&T for a long time through a number of initiatives including the South Africa Reference Group on Women in Science, SET for women, the Department of Science and Technology Women in Science Awards, Women in Physics and the recently launched TWOWS National Chapter by the Academy of Science of South Africa among other initiatives.

In South Africa, we have seen that these initiatives provide a much needed platform for the interaction of women scientists, and for encouraging girls to take up science education and careers.

South Africa's R&D capacity has improved over the recent past, but we will have to increase the number PhD graduates five-fold over the next 10 to 20 years in order to build the sort of knowledge-intensive economy that we need to improve the quality of our lives.

We can reach that goal, if we boost the participation of women in SET.

At the moment, only one in three published scientists is a woman, and she is younger and less qualified than her male colleagues.

Some practical interventions are already in place: the provision of equipment grants; special conference funding; workshops in publication and writing skills; postgraduate grants and research fellowships for women, special concessions for study leave (including lecturing replacements), as well as active institutional communication about research opportunities.

Many of these initiatives are aimed, rightly so, at young researchers in general, but we have to make certain that there is a clear bias towards women in these programmes.

Without incentives that support and recognise women in research, significant change is unlikely to take place.

I would like to urge the TWOWS members, organisations, and networks gathered here to strengthen existing national initiatives in this area and to encourage the formation of these in countries where none exist.

Attention also needs to be devoted to encouraging our young girls to take on science subjects and careers. Mentoring and role modelling have been shown to provide necessary encouragement tools for young girls to close the achievement gap.

They provide young girls with the opportunity to step outside of their current conditions and hope for a better life, give them the tools to do better, to want more, and the ability to make those changes happen.

The distinguished women scientists gathered in this conference have a role to play in providing role model and mentoring services to girls in their respective countries. I would like to encourage TWOWS and its National Chapters to further implement this critical responsibility in shaping the future of STI for the developing countries.

It is also important for TWOWS and its networks to continually ask themselves what they are doing to ensure that S&T is improving the lives of women, increasing their incomes, contributing to poverty reduction and the achievement of the MDGs as science should also be for the benefit of women and society at large.

I close by congratulating the Young Women Scientists who will receive the TWOWS-Elsevier Foundation prizes during this ceremony and call on TWOWS, its friends and TWOWS members to continue to support young women scientists and to celebrate the contributions of women to science.

I wish you all a fruitful conference.