WELCOMING ADDRESS BY ETHEKWINI MUNICPALITY MAYOR, CLLR CYRIL XABA AT THE GBWCCI WORKFORCE SUMMIT, 29 AUGUST 2026

- Programme Director: Prof Unathi Kolanisi
- Deputy Minister of Higher Education: Dr Nomusa Dube-Ncube
- President of GBWCCI: Ms Fawzia Peer
- Deputy President of GBWCCI: Dr Thandi Ngxongo
- Our Keynote Speaker: Prof Onyinye Nwaneri
- GBWCCI Executive
- Distinguished Delegates,
- Leaders in Industry, Government, and Civil Society,
- Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good morning.

It is a profound honour to welcome you all to the City of Durban for this pivotal Workforce Summit, convened by the Global Business Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry (GBWCCI).

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to the organisers for choosing Durban as the host city for this important summit.

You have come to a city that is leading in the country in the fight against unemployment. According to the latest Quarterly Labour Force Survey released by Statistics South Africa (Stats SA), the eThekwini Municipality recorded the lowest unemployment rate among South Africa's metropolitan municipalities.

This achievement is a reflection of the hard work we are doing to create a conducive environment for businesses to thrive, invest and create jobs.

We keep the lights on. We burry potholes. We maintain our roads and verges. We provide clean and safe drinking water. We ensure that the

basic infrastructure and services that businesses and communities depend on are delivered.

These may appear to be basic municipal responsibilities, but they are the building blocks of a thriving economy. A well-functioning city creates the confidence businesses need to invest, expand and employ more people.

Programme Director, we gather here today to confront a challenge that is both a moral imperative and an economic necessity: the deliberate and decisive inclusion of the majority of our population in the mainstream economy.

When we speak about tomorrow’s workforce, we are speaking about the women of South Africa.

The demographic reality of our nation is clear: women constitute more than half of our population and outnumber men. While significant strides

have been made towards bringing women into the mainstream economy, much more remains to be done.

We must therefore move beyond commitments and towards deliberate, meaningful action. We must catalyse the growth, development and sustainability of women-owned businesses, because empowering women entrepreneurs is not merely a matter of social justice, it is a strategic imperative for inclusive and sustainable economic growth.

History demonstrates that successful economies are built through deliberate, government-led industrialisation policies and programmes. This must be a concerted effort across all levels of government—National, Provincial, and Local—and their agencies. We must leverage the immense power of public procurement to be the engine of this transformation.

Government must lead by example and make procurement processes more accessible to women-owned businesses.

This requires proactive capacity building, simplifying compliance, and dismantling the bureaucratic barriers that frustrate women entrepreneurs.

We are encouraged by the leadership shown by the Department of Trade, Industry and Competition through its recently launched Industrial Policy. This framework provides the blueprint for a reimagined economy where women are not peripheral participants but central drivers of industrial growth.

Complementing this are other critical national strategies that must converge to create meaningful impact. The National Skills Master Plan, led by the Department of Higher Education and Training, must align our education and training systems with the actual demands of industry and the economy at large. The skills master plans and frameworks for sectors such as automotive and mining, for example, present significant opportunities for women to participate in value chains that have historically excluded them.

A central challenge we must continue to confront is the persistent mismatch between the skills produced by our universities and technical colleges and the needs of industry. This gap is now exacerbated by the rapid proliferation of emerging technologies, including Artificial Intelligence, Machine Learning, and Robotics.

We agree that all fields may be important in the economy, but thriving nations emphasise on producing more engineers, from nuclear to computer engineering – now AI and Robotics. These successful nations produce large numbers of physicists, biotechnologists, and mathematicians, among others, whilst competing on cutting edge research outputs. Therefore, we must work together to produce graduates who are not only theoretically sound but practically equipped to thrive in a technologically driven economy.

The imperative is twofold. *First*, we must make South Africa globally competitive by developing critical technical skills that position our economy at the forefront of innovation. *Second,* and equally important, we must ensure that our economy serves our nation foremost, and meets the

urgent need for jobs in the face of our persistently high unemployment rate, particularly among the youth.

Ultimately, the success of our industrial policy depends on the emergence of a critical mass of technical women professionals who easily transition into entrepreneurs. This requires all of us to streamline access to finance, mentorship programmes, market linkages, and capacity-building initiatives specifically designed for women-owned enterprises.

Public procurement remains one of the most powerful tools at our disposal. When government buys goods and services from women-owned businesses, we create sustainable market access and demonstrate that we are serious about economic inclusion. This is not preferential treatment; it is smart economics. A diverse supplier base strengthens our economy, fosters innovation, and creates jobs.

The path to a prosperous, stable, and truly democratic South Africa is paved with the economic emancipation of its women. Again, this is a task that requires collaboration among government, industry, and civil society.

EThekwini Municipality will do its utmost to champion this agenda, recognising that the full potential of our economy cannot be unlocked until the full contribution of its women is realised.

Let this summit be the place where we bridge the gap, forge partnerships, and commit to building a future-ready workforce that truly represents the people of South Africa.

I wish you all a productive and impactful summit.

Thank you.