



SOUTH AFRICAN RESERVE BANK

**Remarks by Lesetja Kganyago,
Governor of the South African Reserve Bank,
at the 'Women Who Opened the Doors' coin launch
South African Reserve Bank
Pretoria, 26 August 2026**

Minister in the Presidency responsible for Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities,
Sindisiwe Chikunga,

Commissioner of the South African Revenue Services, Johnstone Makhubu

The Sophie and Henry De Bruyn Legacy Foundation and the Charlotte Mannya-Maxeke
Institute

Ahmed Kathrada Foundation

Families of the many women who marched in 1956, helping shape the struggle for South
Africa's freedom,

South African Reserve Bank leadership and colleagues,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Good afternoon.

It is a privilege to welcome you to the launch of two commemorative circulation coins that honour a history of courage, service, defiance and duty to our country. Today, we celebrate the legacy of Charlotte Mannya-Maxeke and the women who marched to the Union Buildings in 1956.

This is a fitting place for the launch. It was at the State Theatre, directly across the street, that 20 000 women began their march to the Union Buildings to protest against the extension of pass laws to black women. Those women walked along the streets surrounding the South African Reserve Bank (SARB) Head Office towards the Union Buildings, which is the backdrop of our gathering today.

Central banks issue currency for practical purposes, so that people can transact, settle payments and participate in the economy with confidence.

But currency also has public meaning. It is one of the ways in which a nation tells the world whom it represents, what it stands for and what it remembers.

This launch forms part of a broader commemorative programme by the SARB. In June, we released a R2 coin celebrating the learners who protested against education policies in 1976. Later this year, we will release another coin to mark 30 years since the Constitution was signed into law.

Commemorating these defining moments in our history also supports the Milestones of our Freedom programme, launched by President Matamela Cyril Ramaphosa in June under the theme 'Honouring the past, delivering the future'.

Today, we continue that work by officially releasing the R2 coins celebrating the women who changed the course of history and expanded opportunities for future generations.

Charlotte Maxeke's achievements must be understood within the context of the world in which she lived. She came of age under colonial rule, in a society structured by racial exclusion and by patriarchal assumptions about the place of women.

For a black woman at that time, access to higher education was not simply limited; it was almost unimaginable. The barriers before her were legal, social, economic and cultural.

That is why her graduation in 1901, when she earned a Bachelor of Science degree from Wilberforce University in the United States, was so extraordinary. It was not only a personal milestone; it was a direct act of defiance against the limits that the authorities and society of her time had placed on black people, and on black women in particular.

To appreciate the scale of Maxeke's achievement, we should also view it against the realities of our time.

In 1996, almost a century after Maxeke's graduation, only 6.7% of women in South Africa had obtained a tertiary qualification. The gains made in democratic South Africa are significant, but they also remind us that access to higher education remains uneven. By 2022, only 13.1% of South African women had attained a tertiary qualification.

So, it was almost unimaginable that, in 1901, a girl born in the village of Ga-Ramokgopa in Limpopo would even have the opportunity to study at a university.

Even more remarkably, her achievement did not end with personal success. From the outset, she was determined to use her education to serve others. Charlotte Maxeke worked to expand the space available to African women and to resist the laws designed to limit them.

Her words remain relevant today as the world becomes more inward-looking and individual interests increasingly take precedence over global cooperation and civic duty.

“Kill that spirit of self and do not live above your people, but live with them,” she said. “If you can rise, bring someone with you.”

In 1918, she founded and became the first president of the Bantu Women's League. The organisation mobilised African women against the pass laws and confronted the government of the then Prime Minister Louis Botha. She became a voice against low wages and participated in the formation of the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union in 1920.

She also helped prepare the ground for the women's resistance that followed, including the march to the Union Buildings in 1956 to confront Prime Minister JG Strijdom's government.

That march carries the same lesson.

On 9 August 1956, more than 20 000 women came to Pretoria, carrying petitions in their hands and, in many cases, their children on their backs, to protest against the hated pass laws being extended to black women.

Their courage transformed our national story and gave rise to the enduring words: “Wathint' abafazi, wathint' imbokodo – You strike a woman, you strike a rock.”

Maxeke's remarkable achievement and the march of 1956 remind us that women were not spectators in the making of a democratic South Africa. They were organisers. They were leaders. They were politically astute. They were agents of change.

Some of the names of the many women activists are well known, but many others are not recorded in history books. But, together, they changed the course of our country.

These coins are a contribution to correcting a long-standing imbalance in our national memory. Too often, women's leadership, sacrifice and achievements are overlooked. By

placing Charlotte Maxeke and the women of 1956 on our circulation coins, we affirm that women's contributions are central to the story of South Africa. The coins remind us that the story of struggle and liberation cannot be told without acknowledging the women who helped shape it.

These two coins are the first commemorative circulation coins in South Africa to feature women.

We look forward to hearing even more stories of the contributions of women in building our nation as the coins are passed on in households, shops, taxis, schools and workplaces.

My hope is that they also inspire a new generation of women leaders: the next Charlotte Maxeke, Sophie de Bruyn, Lilian Ngoyi, Rahima Moosa, Helen Joseph, Dora Tamana and Albertina Sisulu.

May all young woman and girls who see these coins understand that they are part of this continuing story. May the coins serve as a reminder that leadership, achievement and service are not reserved for others. May they inspire them to not only hold open the doors unlocked by earlier generations, but to unlock new ones.

As Dora Tamana, another prominent anti-apartheid activist known for her unwavering commitment to social justice, equality and gender issues, said: "We have opened the way for you; we must go forward."

Before I conclude, I would like to thank our colleagues at the South African Mint Company and the SARB's Currency Management Department for the work that has gone into producing these coins. Their care and expertise have helped translate these important stories into memorable coins that will now change hands across the country.

Finally, let me remind members of the public that these coins remain ordinary legal tender and are worth their face value. However beautiful they may be, they belong in circulation, to be passed from one person to another.

Thank you.