

STATEMENT BY CHIEF JUSTICE MANDISA MAYA ON BEHALF OF THE JUDICIARY ON THE PASSING OF RETIRED JUSTICE LEONORA VAN DEN HEEVER

It is with profound sadness that the Judiciary announces the passing of the Honourable Justice Leonora van den Heever, who died on 20 November 2025 at the age of 99. Her loss is felt not only by her family and friends, but by the entire legal community and indeed, the nation.

Justice van den Heever's distinguished career stands as a testament to courage and perseverance. As South Africa's first female judge, first appointed in 1969, she shattered a formidable glass ceiling at a time when the bench was the exclusive preserve for male Judges. Later, in 1991, she became the first woman to serve permanently at the Appellate Division which became the Supreme Court of Appeal. Her pioneering presence opened doors for women in the Judiciary and her legacy lives on in the many who follow in her footsteps.

Her legal mind was sharp, principled. She rendered judgments of clarity and conviction, moulding legal doctrine with integrity and a sense of justice that transcended the courtroom. Beyond her role in the Judiciary, she was a woman of culture and an author of note. She wrote children's books, short stories, and contributed significantly to South African literary life. Her commitments extended also into service on cultural boards, poetry, and the arts.



As a symbol of achievement and service, she received numerous honours. Among them, she was awarded an honorary LLD, recognising not only her legal acumen but her unwavering dedication to justice and fairness.

"To her family, we offer our heartfelt condolences. The Judiciary mourns with you and honours her memory. To her former colleagues, the legal fraternity and all whose lives she touched – may we continue to emulate her strength of character and her unshakeable faith in the power of the law to serve society," said Chief Justice Maya.

Justice Leonora van den Heever leaves behind a legacy that is both enduring and transformational. She reminds us that courage and conviction can reshape institutions and open pathways where none existed before. Though she has passed from this world, her spirit endures in the very fabric of our courts.

May she rest in peace, and may her life continue to inspire our judicial service and pursuit of justice. **A**

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MINISTER MMAMOLOKO KUBAYI PAYS TRIBUTE TO THE LATE JUDGE LEONORA VAN DEN HEEVER

The Minister of Justice and Constitutional Development, Mmamoloko Kubayi, has learned with great sadness of the passing of Judge Leonora van den Heever, the first woman ever to serve as a judge in South Africa and the first woman appointed to the Supreme Court of Appeal.

Judge van den Heever passed away at the age of 99.

Minister Kubayi conveys her heartfelt condolences to the Van den Heever family, friends and the broader legal fraternity during this difficult time.

In this regard the minister said Judge van den Heever's appointment as the first woman judge in South Africa was ground-breaking and instrumental in the transformation of the country's judiciary as it paved the way for generations of women judges who have since followed in her footsteps.

The Minister further said that Judge van den Heever was a pioneering and principled jurist whose legacy is defined by integrity, courage and a deep commitment to justice. She added that the late judge broke significant barriers while upholding

exceptional standards of clarity, independence, and fairness.

The minister continued to say Judge van den Heever's significant body of work included landmark judgments protecting citizens' rights, such as issuing an interdict against police harassment of students, and firmly correcting trial irregularities in magistrates' courts to safeguard fair procedure.

The minister added that Judge van den Heever made a significant contribution to interpreting the Divorce Act, emphasising that a divorce should be granted only when there is clear and demonstrable evidence of the irretrievable breakdown of a marriage.

"Known for her sharp wit, humanity and rigorous legal mind, she transformed the judiciary not only through her historic firsts but through the substance of her contributions. Her career opened doors for generations of women in law and remains a lasting example of judicial excellence," concluded the minister. **A**

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