

Are SA women 'not ready' for leadership positions?

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South Africa scores poorly when it comes to the number of women in senior management roles. [New research](#) shows that women hold 28% of senior management roles in businesses with only 3% having a female CEO. This is 5% lower than the global average of 8% with 31% of SA companies having no women in senior management positions.

According to management development expert at the UCT Graduate School of Business (GSB), Jenny Boxall, conversations with industry leaders have revealed that while many companies have women in junior and middle management roles, these individuals are often not put forward for promotion as they are deemed to be “not ready”. More significantly, they don't put themselves forward for promotion because of a lack of confidence.

“In trying to understand what this means and how it can be addressed, the business school has developed a brand new programme to ensure that women heading up the corporate ladder are equipped with the necessary tools to give themselves every chance to get to the top – should they choose to do so,” she says.

Boxall says there are many reasons why women are not put forward or don't apply for more senior positions in their workplaces, including that they tend to underestimate their own abilities. This is a global phenomenon. Imposter syndrome is a concept describing high-achieving individuals who can't internalise their accomplishments and are filled with an irrational fear of being exposed as a fraud. In addition, it is hard to succeed professionally in a society that is very traditional and patriarchal, says Lee-Anne Bac, director of Advisory Services at Grant Thornton in Johannesburg.

Consider that the majority of households in the country are run by single mothers, according to [Statistics South Africa](#) – in addition to being breadwinners and primary care givers, women also have careers and professional lives to juggle.

“Until we make a concerted effort to change our mindset on the role of women in the workplace, at home and in society at large, we're going to continue to battle with inequality in the workplace,” says Bac.

Many women are overburdened by the multiple roles they occupy at work and at home. Personal development expert Dr Mokgathi Mokwena, who also lectures on the Developing Women in Leadership programme, says women face significant challenges on a daily basis in managing their lives.

“It is a question of balance. It is similar to riding a unicycle where, to stay on top, the rider has to constantly adjust her position and be aware of what is going on to counteract any changes in movement or direction,” she says.

Even though South Africa is ranked 15th out of 144 countries on the World Economic Forum's latest [Gender Equality Report](#), the reality is that huge inequalities exist in the country's labour market.

As the WEF's Till Leopold points out, “In South Africa women work, on average, 48 minutes more per day than men do and more than half of their work is still unpaid. That is a trend that is playing out in a similar way across the world, so pretty much everywhere, if you combine paid and unpaid work, women are working longer hours than men but the burden of unpaid work in the household etcetera, is still predominantly on women.”

According to the Commission for Gender Equality, which is currently investigating universities in terms of gender transformation, much more can be done to provide women with opportunities – and then give them support.

Boxall agrees, saying the Developing Women in Leadership programme will give women tools to build confidence, develop a leadership presence and build relationships: “Networks of support are vital when it comes to developing leaders.”

“But we also need to keep talking to corporations and organisations, reminding them that having women in senior management positions impacts positively on many aspects of business – including the bottom line.” She refers to the [Gallup](#) report based on over 40 years of research and 27 million employees, showing that women are excellent managers and highly capable of keeping employees engaged, enthusiastic and committed to their work.

Recognising this, research shows that leading employers in South Africa are taking steps to create more effective support structures for women. According to the Top Employers Institute, which runs a global certification programme recognising excellence in HR, 94% of certified employers in South Africa report having specific diversity initiatives in place to help women progress into senior management. These range from working flexi-time (64%) and compressed working hours (26%) to on-site crèche facilities (9%) and nursing rooms (25%).

These initiatives are encouraging, says Dr Mokwena, but she believes such practices must become more widespread, if we are to see significant numbers of women making it to the top. Not to do so is not only bad news for gender equity, it will also limit the potential of companies and ultimately the economy. According to research from [McKinsey](#), gender diverse companies are 15% more likely to outperform the national industry median.

“Promoting gender equality is not only the right thing to do – it is good for business too,” she says.

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