

Addressing the challenges women face in leadership

By [Christina Naidoo](#)

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When looking at the undeniable challenges that we as women face in leadership, we often neglect to look at how far we've come and how much we have achieved when it comes to breaking through barriers, particularly on the African continent.



Christina Naidoo, COO of Huawei South Africa | image supplied

We are all aware that women constantly face challenges that impact our ability to lead in different industries. These challenges don't just lie within organisations either. There are also serious societal challenges such as the eroding of values and ethics in leadership, and personal challenges such as balancing ever-changing personal lives, while trying to follow a meaningful career path.

Apart from having to prove ourselves more than men, we juggle more family responsibilities than men, taking on the mental load in most households. Many of us delay our careers as a consequence of the "motherhood penalty", and are discriminated against, and we are reportedly less likely to ask for a promotion or raise.

Small wonder then that women hold just 28% of leadership positions in global technology companies and that just 3.3% of JSE-listed companies have a woman at the helm.



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But how are we overcoming these barriers? What progress have we made and most of all, how much more resilient and determined have we become with each step we take forward?

Before we look at the challenges women face in leadership, let us look at three examples in the past decade that show that women's voices are being heard and that they are not fighting this battle alone. These examples are huge milestones and future plans that will help us cross the line that divides men and women in the workplace.

- First, in 2014, the G20 countries, which includes South Africa, committed to reducing the gender gap in labour participation by 25% by 2025. This would bring more than 100 million women into the labour force.
- Secondly, the World Bank Group's Gender Strategy for 2016 – 2023 and the Education Strategy 2020 shows that countries that actively expand the opportunities for women and girls in education and the work environment have achieved greater success and social development.
- And, thirdly, South Africa now ranks 10th in the world in terms of the number of women who hold parliamentary positions.

To me, these are not just statistics and strategies but this is a form of acknowledgement. It's an indication that not only are women capable of doing everything that they are fighting to do, but that the fight for recognition is paying off. If we continue to 'choose to challenge', we will continue to break and eliminate the barriers that women face in leadership roles.

We would also be remiss if we didn't also acknowledge how women have shown their capabilities during the Covid-19 pandemic with reports of the best responses and lowest infection rates coming from countries such as Iceland, New Zealand, Denmark, and Norway – all countries led by women.

It's also worth noting that women scientists played important roles in the development of several Covid vaccines. While this pandemic has been horrific, it has been a chance for women in leadership to step up and show that we women are great leaders, just as capable as - if not more than - their male counterparts, especially in times of crisis.



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There is no doubt that women are very capable of being great leaders but in trying to overcome the challenges they've faced over the years, they also need to undo the pattern of thinking we have developed as a result. The kind of thinking that makes them fearful of speaking up in the workplace. Times are changing for us, and women no longer need to choose to be quiet for fear of the consequences.

As the sayings go "Stay afraid, but do it anyway. You don't have to wait to be confident, just do it and eventually, the confidence will follow" and "You get in life what you have the courage to ask for". Let us remember this Women's Day that as much as we have a long way to go, we have achieved so much and we are more than capable of changing the world if we put our minds to it.

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