

Women are the engineers of the future, says Vallabh

As part of Africa Engineering Week, a couple hundred girls from schools around Johannesburg donned pink hard hats, at the University of Johannesburg (UJ) earlier this week, to get the feel of what it is like to be an engineer.



Grade 10 and 11 learners were addressed by Hema Vallabh, who has an MSc in Chemical Engineering and is Director of GirlEng (a subdivision of SAWomEng - a global organisation aimed at attracting, developing and nurturing the next generation of female engineering leaders), which encourages girls with potential to pursue a career in engineering. She told them that women are the engineers of the future and that the industry needs women like them to dispel the myth that the field was about brute physical strength or masculinity.

Dispelling the grey, geeky grease-monkey engineering myth

Vallabh said that the engineering profession was all too often perceived as a career for grey, geeky, grease-monkeys in hard hats and overalls.

Passionate about imparting industry knowledge to young people in South Africa, she told the learners they needed to understand who they were and what they were passionate about before making career decisions.

"Not all of you here may go on to pursue a career in engineering," said Vallabh. "But at least if you choose not to you will be making an informed decision and not one based on misperceptions about the industry."

The girls were given glitter, glue, marking pens and shiny paper stars to decorate their pink hard hats and express their values and passion - emphasising and celebrating their individuality.

"You all walked in here looking the same, but you're walking out unique," observed Vallabh. "So go out there and make your brand count. Pay it forward and make a difference."

Developing young women in the engineering space

Vallabh thinks it is the industry's responsibility to develop young women in the engineering space.

"I really believe that women are set to be the engineers of the future, but in order to feed the pipeline from grassroots level, we need to start creating awareness of the opportunities that exist in the field and on the continent. Together, we can then make the impact the country, and the continent, so desperately needs."

A visibly excited Nonhlanhla Pholofolo, a Grade 11 learner from Aurora High School in Zola, Soweto, said women should value themselves and work hard to prove that the world belonged to women too.

"This event has made me change my mind about studying medicine. I now want to study mining engineering and will therefore study harder to get over 50% in my maths and science exams," said Pholofolo.

Women engineers from companies such as Group Five, Bosch and Mercedes Benz shared their experience with engineering students and undergraduates, all saying there was an exciting window of opportunity for female engineers to thrive in South Africa.

Africa Engineering Week is a collaboration between the Department of Science and Technology, UNESCO and the Engineering Council of South Africa.

For more information on the event, visit www.ecsa.co.za, www.unesco.org or www.dst.gov.za.

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