

Embracing and celebrating gender differences

 By [Sindy Peters](#)

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Paula Barnard forms part of the leadership at the helm of [World Vision South Africa](#). Prior to entering the NGO space, she lent her skills to the corporate sector with eight years spent in banking before running her own strategy and project management consultancy for seven years.



Paula Barnard

We interviewed the versatile Barnard, currently national director of World Vision SA, to find out more about the organisation's work in SA, the obstacles she's had to tackle as a woman in business, and who inspires her.

■ ***Who is Paula Barnard, and what is your role as World Vision SA's national director?***

Paula Barnard is a passionate woman with a heart for vulnerable children disadvantaged by poverty and injustice. I received this amazing opportunity to use my God-given talents and hard earned skills to ensure that the vulnerable child in South Africa gets the opportunity to be healthy, literate, cared for and loved.

As the CEO or national director of World Vision South Africa, I oversee all advocacy initiatives which are designed to influence policy to in turn ensure a better future for the children of the country. My work also includes the implementation of development initiatives at 14, long-term (15 years) in-community programmes across South Africa, as well as overseeing our current drought relief efforts under the El Niño Disaster Response. Also, World Vision South Africa has 250 staff members that require my leadership and guidance.

■ ***You've had quite a dynamic career so far, what drew you to World Vision?***

The opportunity to make a difference and to lead a change agenda close to my heart and soul. If I'm honest, it was quite a change for me, but I truly believe that God called me to lead this organisation at that time.

■ ***Does any of World Vision's work focus on the upliftment and empowerment of women and girls in South African society?***

Yes, absolutely. We see the girl child as one of the most vulnerable in our society today and we work very hard to create accessible opportunities that will enable them – in time - to achieve their full potential. There are several programmes – especially under our health, education and economic development areas that are targeted directly towards helping the girl

child.

Our Channels of Hope for Gender Based Violence, is a faith-based programme aimed at creating the mind and behavioural shifts necessary to ensure that our women and girls are treated equally in society. We train pastors and other religious leaders to influence change from a faith perspective ensuring they can truly bring equality in their congregations.

■ ***Have you at any point faced any gender-related obstacles during your career? If yes, how did you overcome them?***

Being one of the few female CEOs (there are over 100 CEOs and less than 10 are female) within a global organisation is a challenge. You always have to work harder to get the credibility that your male counterparts seem to just have. As a female CEO, you are almost always labelled as “emotional”, and that becomes a challenge when you are faced with robust discussions, especially if you are the only woman at the table.

I’m not sure that I have been able to overcome them. I have learnt to accept them, and tried to use these labels in a positive way. For example, being passionate about helping children and truly being empathetic to their situation is not necessarily something that comes naturally to men, and I have found that being able to be authentic about this has been my way of embracing and celebrating the gender differences.

■ ***Is there a female figure that has had a positive influence on your life? If yes, who and how so?***

Yes, my mother Adelaide Turnbull probably had the biggest influence on my life. Her example of courage, faith and overcoming against all odds has really shaped the way I want to interact with the world.

From a personal and professional perspective, there are a few women who I truly appreciate (and try to emulate) for their contribution to breaking the ceiling in their own way: Wendy Lucas-Bull; Jenna Clifford; Mother Teresa; Laura Bush; Malala Yousafzai; Dr. Jane Goodall; Aung San Suu Kyi; Wangari Maathai; Irma Venter; Zola Budd; and more recently Maria Kgabo and Ledile Mphahlele, the respective World Vision team leaders in Limpopo and KwaZulu-Natal.

■ ***What do you believe is the role of women in driving sustainable development?***

I truly believe that this is such an untapped domain for female leaders. We all try to prove ourselves in the business world, which is frankly built to suit the male ego, but forget that “caring” for another is our greatest strength. Humanitarian development, I believe, is much more suited to a female leader.

I also believe that once Africa can get its girl child and women to rise from their circumstances, they will save the continent. They do already, in many small ways. In almost all my programme visits, it is almost always the Gogo that is caring for five or six orphaned grandchildren on a meagre grant or pension. Granny-headed households are an accepted term in our world; the Gogos are my heroes.

■ ***Do you think, in 2016, it is important to have a month dedicated to women in South Africa?***

I think it is good, although all the talk about women’s rights doesn’t mean much if there isn’t concerted effort to change the way society sees empowering women and the upliftment of the girl child. And that goes for men and women.

■ ***What is your message for Women’s Month?***

Breathe. You are just one woman. The fate of the world does not rest in your hands only. You can only do so much and you do more than enough. You are enough. You are loved. Be humble. Wear mascara, and always wear flat shoes, you never know when you need to run towards your next adventure.

ABOUT SINDY PETERS

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