

Is SA lagging when it comes to women in C-suite roles?

By [Rayne Handley](#)

9 Apr 2018

Having so much recent focus on women and their roles in society is, of course, a good thing. Even if, very belated. It is clear that change needs to happen and needs to be on a much deeper level. Not the superficial, token changes that are mostly seen, but real change. Real acceptance. Yet is this truly happening in South Africa?



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Women in the workplace, mothers in the office, dual income homes - these trends have been widely discussed and are no longer hot topics but are we still ignoring the proverbial elephant in the room?

Globally there have been massive shifts in the perceptions of women in the workplace and huge improvements in inclusiveness in organisations at all levels and therefore we seem to be making extensive progress in removing gender biases and inequalities from the workplace. Nevertheless, when it comes to women in business in South Africa, change has been slow and in many cases superficial. The disparity in male and female board member distribution is glaring and persistent. Power disparities appear to still work in the favour of men, and women can be seen to be the victims in most instances of sexual harassment in the workplace. Change cannot reasonably be expected to be instantaneous, but so too is it unreasonable to prolong, at the very least, the transformation of board composition. The motivations for a greater female presence in C-Suite positions are well-documented, so why the big resistance?

What really needs to happen?

Women want to be taken seriously. Their differences are very often their greatest assets and companies need to recognise this. There needs to be a shift in thinking away from antiquated beliefs surrounding women in positions of power. Change cannot be driven by legislation and vague good governance practices alone. Until leaders acknowledge the value in board diversity, and advocate policy that drives meaningful inclusiveness at an executive level, female representation will remain dwarfed. Change needs to be driven by a genuine respect and understanding for the value of contributions women in business make and a desire to rectify the deeply engrained, highly sensitive and perpetuating gender issues of South Africa.

Getting to the board is problematic enough but so often if a woman sits on the board of a firm, she is joined by men only. This needs to change. Very often being alone means the female voice is lost or talked down to and dismissed. However, what makes it even more difficult, is very often those doing the dismissive behaviour are not even aware as it is so deeply entrenched in who they are. Therefore, there is often not enough consciousness to change this behaviour.

However, as much as female voices are often unheard by their male colleagues, similarly they are dismissed by other women. Women need to support and mentor each other as much as men need to make room for them. Aside from the qualifications and business abilities, very often there is extra burden placed on females in that their appearance is also judged. And many times this is by other women. Which means on top of having to prove themselves as being relevant in the C-Suite, they also have to meet the expected high standards of physical appearances that others place on them. Furthermore, the prevailing difficulty in securing executive positions as a female often leads to rivalry between women as opposed to solidarity in tackling the mutually faced challenges.

How should this change happen?

As with any change, firstly the problems and prejudices need to be acknowledged. A true understanding of the rife inequality that exists in our boardrooms needs to be accepted. What really needs to happen is acceptance for all and appreciation for what women offer despite their gender or age. And very often this needs to start at home. Our ingrained ways of thinking mostly start in the environments we grow up in. Women are very often the greatest influencers at home – how they allow themselves to be treated, what behaviours are encouraged, and so on. They need to start treating their children equally so their daughters grow up believing they are capable of achieving what males can and their sons believe that females belong with them in all areas of life.

Men and women need to start to work together. Gender inequality is not a female issue that men ought to help out with. It is a human rights issue, necessitating a cohesive, systematic, and planned redress. All male executives need to educate themselves on gender issues as they relate to the workplace and integrate gender equality into strategic board plans. And learn to accept the differences in age, equality and backgrounds that exist.

And women need to make a stand, to ensure their voices are heard and not give up or let them fade into obscurity. It has been ingrained in women for so long that the man is always in power, is the leader and should always be listened to. Often women accept that this is just the way it is or don't appreciate the gravity of the situation as this is "just the way it is". It also can seem an insurmountable problem. However, it shouldn't be and voices against inequality need to be heard - now is the time to speak up about biases and prejudice, even those which are covert. Women need to actively participate. Now is the time to make a stand against gender bias. Now is the time to educate those willing to listen. Everyone needs to support both female and male colleagues so that the differences between the two don't eliminate either in any way but rather encourage the growth and development of everyone.

There is room for all at the table. But it is up to all to ensure this happens.

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