

Taking action, not spa treatments with Zamantungwa Khumalo

 By Cari Van Wyk

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Attending the PMA Foundation Women's Fresh Perspectives Breakfast recently, I had the honour to meet one of the most inspiring young women from South Africa, Zamantungwa Khumalo. Khumalo grew up in Soweto and overcame many obstacles to become a successful and outspoken woman in her industry.



Zamantungwa Khumalo

She is currently a producer for Power FM 98.7 and a member of the selection committee for the South African Youth for International Diplomacy. Khumalo is passionate about African development, women empowerment, and entrepreneurship. She is a member of the World Economic Forum Global Shapers Community (Tshwane Hub). On top of her involvement in these initiatives, she also co-founded Africa Unleashed. At the young age of 25 she is already taking the globe by storm, so don't let her age fool you.

■ *Do you feel there's a glass ceiling for women in your industry?*

Zamantungwa Khumalo: I think there's glass ceiling for women just generally and we still have such a long way to go. If you look at the representation of genders in the top-end of every industry across the country, you find that it's very male dominated. If anything, that tells us that there is a barrier of entry for women when they get to a certain level. So, for me, it's identifying where the ceiling is because I think in different industries it's at different places. We must make sure we try and break it.

■ *Who is your biggest influence?*

Khumalo: It varies and I know that's such a cop-out. I draw inspiration from different women. I was raised by my mother and my aunt. My mother was one of the smartest kids in the school she went to, she got really high marks in Maths and Science, but she could never access university. She wanted to go study BSc at Wits, but because her mom was a domestic worker and they didn't have money, she didn't. She ended up working at a bank and helped pay for my aunt to go through teaching college. So they are a very big inspiration in my life and I often draw on them when I find myself in difficult times.

There's also a very good friend of mine who is actually in India attending a leadership conference. She motivates and inspires me in ways that are out of this world. She also grew up in a township not so far away from me, and even though she came from a household where her father was a bus driver and her mother was unemployed, she was able to get straight A's through high school and she got to Varsity. For her first year in Varsity, she was travelling by train, but still got straight A's and ended up graduating at Wits with a distinction. She went on to do a post-grad degree at Rhodes and now she's pursuing a second post-grad at UCT.

Her story is really that of a young girl who had to fight so many obstacles but was able to come out on top and really be phenomenal at what she does. Her work ethic is something I have yet to see. I often call myself a lazy person; I'm one of the laziest productive people I know, but her work ethic is out of this world. Women like that who defy the odds and women who pull other women up, for me is a huge inspiration.

🔴 ***What do you think is the biggest issue facing women in South Africa?***

Khumalo: I want to say patriarchy and unpack that. We're socialised wrong and it's such a hard one. The issue is that the messages we tell little girls and little boys are so different and so warped from such an early age, that by the time they are our age, unlearning it is so much worse, because it's everywhere. It's in the colours you choose for girls vs. boys and the toys. If you're a mom and you have to buy your child a toy or outfit, you struggle to find a female doctor's outfit, instead you find a female nurse outfit. So that's what we're saying to children; boys are doctors and girls are nurses. Imagine if you're learning that at the age of three.

That is very troublesome and problematic, so we need to change what we tell girls and boys at a young age. When we start them young and start them right, when they grow up they won't be intimidated when their girlfriend earns more money or if she's a doctor they are a teacher for example. That would be normal, just each of us pursuing a career we're passionate about.

It's the messaging we're getting wrong. The reality of patriarchy is, it's not just holding women back but men as well because the men can't be human. They have to be these superman providers who have everything intact and must earn more than the woman, they must drive the better car, must have a better career. Patriarchy is holding everyone hostage and we need to undo that.

🔴 ***What is the biggest barrier you faced in your career to become successful?***

Khumalo: For me, it's my age. I'm often the youngest in the room and have been the youngest in many rooms. A lot of people get over the fact that I'm a woman. Since a young age, I've been very commanding and assertive and I think I get that from my older brother. I grew up around a boy who did that and I thought that that's what people did, that it's normal behaviour. Only to go into the big bad world to realise that that's not normal behaviour, it's boy behaviour. I just went on with it, because it's what I'm used to.

There's that and I'm young, so they don't take me seriously. They use my youth as a weapon against me as opposed to my gender. I suspect, though, the older I get the age bit will even out and then the gender will come into play a bit more.

🔴 ***What advice would you give women who are pursuing a similar career?***

Khumalo: Speak up. Don't be afraid to be yourself, even when yourself is weird. I know we live in a society that makes it hard for people to be who they authentically are, so we try to mold ourselves into different variations of who we think we're

supposed to be, but that won't get you very far. Know who you are, know you're worth and stand your ground. You should have a list of non-negotiable regarding yourself and stick to it no matter which career you're in. Things that you won't change, no matter the situation. The moment you have that, it makes it just a little bit easier to navigate your way, so that when you're in difficult times you won't compromise yourself.

▣ **How do you feel about women's month?**

Khumalo: It has been such a political month for me. We've been seeing a lot of campaigns, where I'm concerned, is anti-woman and are patronising. From the Mairie Claire's 'In her shoes' campaign to Bic's "[think like a man, work like a boss](#)". If anything it shows me that people don't get the importance of a gender conversation and the fact that women have actual issues. We've reduced women's month to spa treatments and hampers, and it should be more than that.

In 1956 women took to the streets in the thousands and they said enough is enough. These were women, black and white, who said we're not agreeing to pass laws. These are women who took a political stance and women's month really should be about not only us commemorating and celebrating them, but also, as women saying "what are the things we're 'gatvol' of, that we want an end to and what actions are we going to take to make sure we get it.

Women of 1956 took action not spa treatments. This is a political month and we're not using it properly by reducing it to goodie bags. Yes, we must pamper women, but do that on valentines day or mother's day or any other day. On women's month we should have serious conversations, men and women, to say what is not working in our society, how are we creating barriers of entry in any of the industries, how can we undress that, how can we fight the status quo. We're missing the opportunity to put real issues on the agenda.

▣ **What is your message for women's month?**

Khumalo: I want women to be brave enough to be the leaders that they are yearning for. It's tough, but think to yourself what type of leader, manager, colleague do you want and are you that person? And if you're not, start being that person, because when you start being that person people will start treating you differently. Greet people with a smile in the mornings, change your attitude and they will start emulating you. That does make a change, imagine ten people in your office making that shift. We need to be the people we're waiting for and yearn for who can support and encourage us. Be that for somebody else and for as many people in the office as you can. It must start with you.

ABOUT CARI VAN WYK

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