

Gender equality as a business imperative

By  Robyn de Villiers

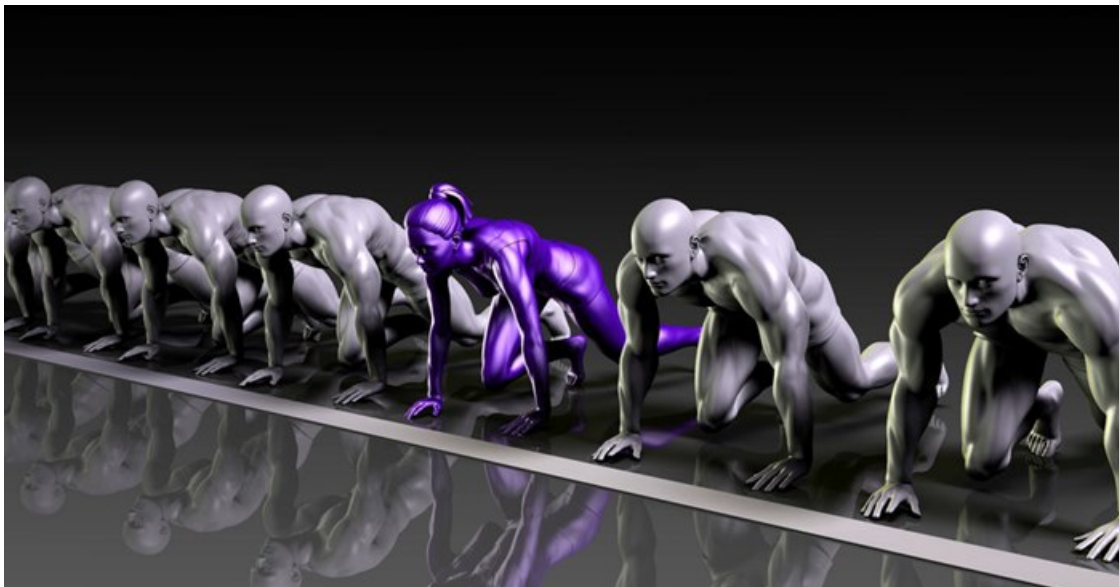
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A view of how seriously South African companies are taking the challenge of women being able to shape - not just fit into - the economy.

I hosted a panel discussion on “Gender equity as a business imperative” at the Holmes Report’s In2Summit on 29 March 2017. Panel participants were Colleen Larsen, CE, Business Engage Association; Gert Schoonbee, managing director, T-Systems; Samantha Swanepoel, divisional executive director, marketing and digital – Barloworld Equipment; and Wrenelle Stander, senior vice president – corporate affairs and real estate services, Sasol.

Why is gender equity increasingly an agenda item for leading organisations?

It has never been more front-of-mind. Providing a global and local context, realise that gender equity is one of the sustainable development goals – goal number five aims to achieve gender equity and to empower all women and girls. The African Union has launched the African Women’s Decade 2010 – 2020 to accelerate the implementation of commitments on gender equality and women’s empowerment on the continent and gender equity is enshrined in the South African Constitution.



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From a business and commercial perspective, women are increasingly influential, controlling [\\$20 trillion](#) – or 70 percent – of global consumer spending power, and making or influencing more than [85 percent](#) of household purchasing decisions, even when it comes to big ticket items like family holidays, cars and homes.

Women are also driving [business results](#). Companies with a higher proportion of women in executive roles achieve stronger financial results, on average 20 percent better than companies that are run predominantly by men. And start-up teams with at least one female founder perform [63 percent](#) better than all male start-ups.

Landmark legislation to improve gender equality has passed, or is underway, in countries all over the world. Whether it is promoting equal pay, or ensuring parental leave, women are increasingly high on the political agenda.

So how well are South African companies doing in realising gender equity?

It appears that while everyone acknowledges some need, many don't know how to get started. According to Colleen Larsen, president of the 30% Club Southern Africa, which now boasts 28 members, "The legislation is in place but organisations have yet to acknowledge the real value."

What needs to change?

According to Wrenelle Stander, it is up to senior leadership to articulate the need at the board level. But this involves being able to unpack real business value for why gender equity should be an imperative and it also requires being prepared to step up as sponsors of women in the workplace.

Gert Schoonbee has taken a diversity and nation-building view of the challenge. "It originates out of my decision to create a South Africa that I would be proud to raise my three sons in." As such, his organisation has a value system that drives this as a business imperative across four areas: gender, race, youth and disability. "It must be seen for its commercial value, while addressing social need," he says.

Panellists agreed that corporates need to do more to elevate women in business. There is an abundance of women's forums, but outside of these forums organisations need to mainstream and embed gender equity principles.

Too many corporates are doing things that no-one knows about, according to Larsen. A more collaborative approach needs to be taken. "We should be doing a better job of cross-pollinating as a community and communicating our joint successes," she said.

For as much as corporates need to make changes, women also need to do more to push their agendas. This involves being prepared to take risks and take chances. Samantha Swanepoel noted a "lack of self-promotion and women waiting for opportunities to come their way."

And they all agreed that the role of communications in promoting gender equity cannot be overestimated.

Companies selling the products or services where women influence the purchasing decision need to make sure that their communications hit the mark with the important female audience. Organisations wanting to reap the benefits of mixed gender executive teams need to promote an employer brand that will attract both genders. And, internally, organisations need to communicate effectively with their people if they want to get buy-in for their gender equity initiatives and if they want to achieve the stretch targets so many are setting today.

ABOUT ROBYN DE VILLIERS

Robyn de Villiers is Chairman and CEO of Burson-Marsteller: Africa.
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