

Cocreating a brighter female tech future

 By [Leigh Andrews](#)

9 Aug 2018

Bonnie Horbach is a true Jill of all trades. She's been the Consul General of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, based here in Cape Town, for the last five years, and spearheaded passion projects the likes of Inspiring Fifty SA, with the second round of winners announced last night. Here, she explains the importance of encouraging more females in the Stem professions and why she says, "there's something special going on in Africa"...



Bonnie Horbach, Dutch CG in Cape Town and founder of Inspiring Fifty SA.

Inspiring females are all around us in the realm of technology and innovation, but if we don't make a noise about them, we often don't notice they're there.

For example, disclaimer: I was one of this year's 276 Inspiring Fifty SA nominees (that impressive number is up from last year's 250), as an industry analyst in support of the philosophy, "If she can see it, she can be it," and my passion for issues of inclusion, equality and diversity, highlighted in my weekly [#FairnessFirst](#) articles.



#FairnessFirst: Attention! Alexa and Siri are not real-life 'women in tech'!

Leigh Andrews 26 Mar 2018



I didn't make the cut, but it really is such an honour to be nominated, especially when you see the calibre of entries.

Here's another fun fact: my telephonic interview with Horbach below was transcribed through Voyc, one of the many inspired innovations created by one of the inaugural Inspiring Fifty SA winners, Lethabo Motsoaledi of Motsoaledi & West.



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But I digress. What exactly is Inspiring Fifty? I caught up with Horbach for a detailed overview, as well as a chat on the state of African innovation ahead of her transfer to Lithuania, and what lies ahead on the next rung of her personal career ladder...

■ **Share an overview of Inspiring Fifty's origins and the quality of entries.**

Inspiring Fifty is a platform that recognises the top fifty most inspiring women working in Stem, with the network and platform proving fundamental in addressing the under-representation of women in tech.



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It also offers a network of role models to girls and young women aspiring to work in the sector, thereby ensuring a representative, diverse workforce in technology.

It was started in the Netherlands by two women in tech. They had their own company, and noticed that they were always the only females in bigger groups. They decided they wanted to change that to benefit the field of technology, particularly by inspiring young girls to choose technology and the Stem subjects in school.



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That's how Inspiring Fifty Netherlands started, which snowballed to include Inspiring Fifty Nordics, Inspiring Fifty UK and France and Europe.

I met one of the ladies during a visit to the Netherlands for business. She spoke about the Inspiring Fifty initiative and I said, "This is so amazing, I'm going to take it to Africa, I'm going to take it to South Africa."

So last year, we held the first Inspiring Fifty here in Africa. That's the first time it's been held out of Europe. Now there's also Inspiring Fifty Canada, but Africa was first, so that in itself is an accomplishment!

Last year's Inspiring Fifty SA was already very successful, so this year we wanted to continue and build the brand.



South Africa's first Inspiring Fifty women

8 Aug 2017



Inspiring Fifty really creates a remarkable network as each new batch of nominees is introduced. What also contributes to the strength of the network is the focus on all the women and not just the final 50. I looked over the 276 nominees and I must say I'm relieved not to be a judge, it would be so difficult to choose!

The standard and quality of what these women have achieved is just amazing. I honestly do not think that the Netherlands has the calibre of women that one sees here in South Africa.



#InspiringFiftySA 2018 winners announced

1 Aug 2018



Last year, one of Inspiring Fifty founders was an Inspiring Fifty SA judge, and she also commented on the calibre of the country's nominees. We could have easily made it the #Inspiring200SA, instead! When I go through those that haven't made the cut, I go, "Wow, this one really should have made the cut... and this one, and this one!" But it's not for me to decide.

■ **Let's dive right into the criteria the judges look for from the nominees, to make that final 50.**

It really is difficult, because you want to ensure they are judged on the same set of criteria. So the judges will look at:

1. The **organisational impact** of the women in the companies they work in;
2. They look at whether they have a **social impact** and whether they are giving back – that's very important, especially here in South Africa;
3. They look at the **innovation impact** of their work;
4. and the fourth element is that of **context**. That's in terms of where the women come from, because you know better than I do that in South Africa, some have a more difficult path than others so you have to take that into account, see where they have ended up and to honour their path.

That's exactly what Inspiring Fifty is about.



#InspiringFiftySA's panel of judges for second edition

29 May 2018



If they have walked that rocky path and succeeded, the young girls that follow them will have it easier.

“ It's also very important to note that it's not about race and colour, but about the different sectors, businesses, academia. Is it an area that's very male-dominated? If so, the first woman to enter that field always has a more difficult task to pave the way than the woman who follows after. ”

■ **So true. Talk us through the need to bring more visibility to the achievements of women, especially in innovation and tech, and particularly in Africa.**

Firstly, it's particularly important for women who have succeeded in the STEM fields to be acknowledged and showcased. We just don't hear about the brilliant females or see their stories. By doing so, they become role models for other girls and women, and by connecting them, they will find a support network.



#FairnessFirst: Amplifying the female voice

Leigh Andrews 15 Jan 2018



This also extends to panels at seminars and conferences. We're tired of only seeing men on these panels. By showcasing women, hopefully these brilliant will not be overlooked anymore.

In any case, there should be more diversity in any leading profession. We all have different perspectives, and a diverse

team with different people makes better choices so it is not only about male and female, it is about encouraging diversity.

By highlighting women in these influential positions, people will hopefully not walk past and think, “Oh, it's just the coffee lady.” In my experience as the Consul General, often I would be in a room where people would look to me to get the coffee ready. Upon hearing who I am, the look in their eyes would be that of: “*How can she be the Consul General?*”

It is important that we all change our perspectives, that we change our perceptions to realise that women can be whatever they can be. We need to get to a point where it is not impossible for a woman to be whatever a man can be, so that the future generation can follow in those footsteps.

“ Read this! ♀💡💡 #womenintech <https://t.co/Ypd2ygNW0t>— Rambling Litchi (@Leigh_Andrews) July 20, 2018 ”

📌 **Yes! That ties in strongly with your focus on the ‘If she can see it, she can be it’ movement.**

Yes, last year, we tried to collect inspiring women from all walks of life and from all sectors, so the mix of winners was as diverse as possible.

This means that it is not only women who run their own business or have flourished in academia. We honoured a variety of women making an impact in all aspects of Stem, across sectors.

“ @UCTEBE is running a Women in Engineering campaign in the faculty to attract more females into engineering. We have some amazing female engineering students who are doing great things #WomEng #UCTNews pic.twitter.com/jOF7hXooD4— EBE Faculty (@UCTEBE) April 25, 2018 ”

For example, one of last year’s nominees worked for TFG, the Foschini Group.



Foschini launches “The Future is Female” creators campaign

The Foschini Group 21 Aug 2017



She was their first coloured, non-executive member in senior management and when we spoke to her about the impact of her nomination, she said:

“ It made such a difference, not only to me, but to all of the women in the company who aspired to do the same. All of a sudden, I was seen by all the senior managers as someone with potential – normally, they would not even look at me. ”

So Inspiring Fifty’s broader purpose is also about changing the mindset of established businesses.

■ **Yes, I think it's actually worse there, because those big corporates are usually so entrenched in that mindset of 'male leadership and that that's just the way it is'.**

Exactly, and the women that they do select for their core team are those who do not always represent the reality – for example, they are not single moms.

Often, the women who are selected are women who stay in the office beyond the expected hours and have the same outlook as those male leaders. That's why the men identify with them.

■ **So ultimately, having a few women on the board isn't necessarily even true diversity, even though they're different genders. Lots of food for thought in that. Jumping ahead to the fact that you're leaving SA very soon, please share a few of your highlights from your time here and what's next in your career...**

Well, the easy answer is that I'll be the Kingdom of the Netherlands' ambassador in Lithuania, but singling out just one highlight is too difficult because I've had the best time in South Africa.



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Leigh Andrews 13 Apr 2015



#Cocreating SA's design future

Leigh Andrews 5 Nov 2015



There are so many events and initiatives we organised and so many different people I've met who inspired me, whether that was through Inspiring Fifty, which is definitely one of my babies and one of my highlights. Another highlight was the Changemaker dinners.

I organised these dinners every six weeks around a specific theme: Women's Day, tech, history, etc. Basically, people from different walks of life who do not know each other from the outset - myself included - gathered at my residence to talk about these sometimes-difficult topics in the intimacy of my house. It is an amazing platform; I usually get so excited that I cannot sleep afterwards - it's such an energising experience to really listen to each other and create a better understanding for each other's perspectives!



#CoCreate2Accelerate: the gamification of education

Cari Van Wyk 18 Aug 2016



So that's one of the things I loved working on – making connections and building the #CocreateSA brand from the very start.

Hopefully, I've also been successful in changing the perception in the Netherlands about how to look at the African continent. If I look back, five years is a long time and I think the paradigm has shifted in that time.

“ Now, people are looking at the African continent from an opportunity perspective rather than from an aid perspective. That's very important, because we need to see each other as equals. More than ever before, the African continent is in the driver's seat. People know what they want and how they want it, and we - from a first-world stance - have to start listening to them. ”

This is also why I'm also sad to leave, because the African continent has just started the journey. Things are changing and we're only at the beginning of it all. I would have loved to be part of the journey for a longer period of time.

■ **That's amazing. I've certainly felt your impact myself, from when we first met at a #CocreateSA design event a few**

years ago, where it all started. I'm sure we'll still hear from you and your future successes. Will you still be involved in Inspiring Fifty?

Yes, I am hoping to introduce it in Lithuania - so that will be fun. My heart lies on the African continent, so one way or the other, I will come back, and not just for a holiday!



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“ There is something special about this continent, there is a special chemistry now and an eagerness to change the lives for the better. I am very hopeful and positive about the future of South Africa and Africa as a whole. ”

That optimism is what it's all about. Follow [Horbach](#), [Cocreate SA](#) and the [Inspiring Fifty](#) hashtag on Twitter for the latest updates.

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ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

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