

CEOs urged to do more for women empowerment

Minister of Women, Children and People with Disabilities, Lulu Xingwana, has urged all CEOs to become ambassadors of women empowerment and gender equality in their respective companies and industries.



(Image: GCIS)

Speaking at the conference on UN Women's Empowerment Principles on Monday in Midrand, Xingwana, who was concerned about the small number of women who occupy company boards, called on CEOs to utilise every platform available to promote the values and objectives of the UN principles.

"The economic inclusion and empowerment of women is not an act of charity, it's an economic imperative," Xingwana said, adding that the country had a large enough pool of women from which to groom talent.

The UN Women's Empowerment Principles initiative was launched on 4 July 2011 by Trade and Industry Minister Rob Davies.

It provides a set of considerations to help the private sector focus on key elements integral to promoting gender equality in the workplace, marketplace and community.

The Women's Empowerment Principles, forged through an international multi stakeholder consultative process led by UN Women and the United Nations Global Compact (UNGC), provide a "gender lens" through which business can survey and analyse current initiatives, benchmarks and reporting practices.

The launch was done jointly by the department and the International Federation of Business and Professional Women (BPW), a non-profit organisation which was founded in 1930 in Geneva, Switzerland.

BPW International has grown to become the most influential international network of business and professional women with affiliates in over 100 countries on five continents, including South Africa.

Xingwana reaffirmed their commitment to the objective of building a society that strives relentlessly towards genuine women empowerment and gender equality

"We are here to recommit ourselves to the UN Women's Empowerment Principles. I am confident that arising from the commitments we will make today, we will collectively move with speed to implement programmes that will accelerate the realisation of a truly non-sexist corporate environment.

"I salute South Africa's CEOs who have already signed the CEO Statement of Support for UN Women's Empowerment Principles and those who will be signing today," Xingwana said.

During the launch of the principles last year, 62 CEOs from various corporate businesses as well as state owned organs, signed the CEO statement and Davies said it would add value to gender streamlining and emancipation.

Xingwana noted an array of measures introduced by the country since 1994 to promote women empowerment and uphold gender equality which has allowed women to occupy influential positions in government and play an important role in decision-making processes.

However, she said they were concerned at the continued exclusion and underrepresentation of women at executive level of many corporate companies.

"It is disheartening that in this day and age, there are still companies that have a 0% women representation of directors and executive managers. Women only hold 4.4% of CEO/MD positions, 5.3% of chairperson positions and 15.8% of all directorships," Xingwana pointed out.

BPW South Africa President Toni Gomes said it was imperative for boards to understand the current legislation and also keep abreast of changes, and to appoint women who were aptly qualified.

"All you have at the end of the day is women in leadership positions who are not up to the task. This has a negative effect on all women in the workplace. The fault not only lies with the company, which is trying to increase their dti score but women who are prepared to accept being used to tick the BEE and gender boxes.

"Without training, they can't participate in discussions or give opinions; they get no respect from other board members, their voice is muted and their advice isn't heard because they don't understand what they are doing there," said Gomes.

The dti, BPW and Deloitte, in consultation with the UN, have set up a direct development programme for women, which is the first of its kind. The training is certified by the dti and Deloitte.

"Women now need to be more assertive and demand directed development training before taking on these wars, otherwise we will still be fighting these battles many years into the future," she said.

Group Five CFO Cristina Teixeira said the challenge of women presentation still remained, especially in engineering and construction, with some of the contributing factors including limited opportunities and a lack of individual confidence and cultural biases.

"Myths and deceptions may still be overcome by women's physical strength, perseverance, experience and know-how. These challenges emphasise a need for urgent solutions that will lay a new foundation for sustainable information and growth for decades to come," said Teixeira.