

Gender equality in the workplace

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Gender equality in South Africa is an issue that is generating discussion and action at the highest levels - but given our patriarchal history, which exists across all cultures within the country, it will take some time for the decision to bring equality into play to actually filter down to practical, everyday reality.

Introducing gender equality is tantamount to changing an accepted cultural value, and like the apartheid legacy of racial discrimination, moving away from gender discrimination will take several generations before this new value has a comfortable fit in society.

Even though gender equality is generally accepted as a social goal of our modern society, there are many individuals who find conflict with the aspiration of equality and their moral stand point and beliefs - particularly in the older generations.

"We should only look at the moral fallouts around the promotion of gender equality as a value. There are just too many religious and cultural groups which see this as wrong, insisting for themselves that men have the moral right or obligation to be leaders of women and children," said Reverend Desmond Lesejane of the Ecumenical Service for Socio-Economic Transformation based in Johannesburg.

But, whether the older generation likes it or not, the workplace is slowly changing to meet the aspirant expectations of women. Yes, there is still the issue of 'window dressing' where women, are promoted to supposedly prominent positions, but have no real business power.

There is also the fact that women have a lot of catching up to do. Not because they are inferior in anyway, but because they have not been afforded equal opportunities. If there was a choice between a boy child or girl child receiving further education - the opportunity would have gone to the boy child and chances are, even in our so-called enlightened society, it still will.

Deputy President Phumizile Mlambo-Ngcuka cited education as one of the most important elements in the empowerment of women in South Africa at a women's day meeting in August this year. She added that "a paradigm shift on the part of those who still have control of the economy" was needed to draw more women into economic activity.

Since the 1994 elections, the constitution and a further series of laws has banned discrimination and demanded employment equity - this includes the lack of gender discrimination and the promotion of gender equity in the workplace. But for many women there has been little change.

According to a Labour Force Survey conducted in the third quarter of 2005 only one in five women had a formal job, compared to one in three men. In most cases women earned less than male colleagues doing the same job.

In 2005 two-fifths of men earned less than R1 500 a month. By comparison half the women working population earned less than R1 500 a month. African women made up almost one third of all employed people, but less than one tenth of senior management. In contrast, white men comprised less than one tenth of all employees, but filled 40 percent of senior management positions.

From this it is clear that the laws are just one of many steps to be taken towards gender equality in the workplace.

Gender equality goes hand in hand with democracy at all levels, said KwaZulu-Natal provincial Premier Sbu Ndebele at a Women's Day rally recently. He said that women's rights were, indeed, human rights, adding that the provincial government had exceeded the 30 percent target of women representatives at all levels of decision making.

In the public sector there has been noted progress towards gender equality. Women comprise more that 30 percent of Parliament and close to 40 percent of cabinet ministers, including deputy ministers.

The private sector has been slower in taking up the issue of equality. Extrapolating data from the sixth edition of the "Top 10 Companies to Work For in South Africa" shows the following:

Twenty-four percent of employees at South Africa Breweries Ltd are women, and 28,9 percent of leadership positions in the company are held by women.

Standard Bank women employees make up just over 64 percent of total employees and just over 40 percent of leadership positions are filled by women.

Seventy-five percent of Flight Centre's staff are women, with women filling 90 percent of middle management and 50 percent of top management positions.

Microsoft has a staff compliment that is 39 percent women and employs women in 32 percent of its leadership positions. Discovery's women employees make up 65 percent of all employees and 50 percent of leadership positions.

Cashbuild's employs just under 21 percent female staff and women fill just over 12 percent of leadership positions.

Fifteen percent of SASOL employees are women and women hold 17 percent of the leadership positions. Investec's quotient is just under 59 percent female employees with women in 38 percent of leadership positions. ABSA employs just over 65 percent women and women employees hold just over 38 percent of leadership positions. Women comprise 68 percent of the staff compliment for Edgars Consolidated Stores and hold 55 percent of the leadership positions.

Figures for the companies rated in the top sixty to work for in South Africa show an average of 31 percent female employees with an average of 17 percent of leadership positions being filled by women. With women comprising 51 percent of the population, we clearly have a long way to go before we have true gender equality in the workplace in South Africa.

"We still have to fight to be CEOs, to be in boards and executive management. We have to use these positions to change things in private, public and social sectors once we are appointed and not maintain the status quo," said Deputy President Mlambo-Ngcuka at the launch of the Progressive Women's Movement on 9th August 2006.

A 2006 study of gender equality in the newsrooms across South Africa indicates that there was no emotional commitment to equity - but rather that it was viewed as another box to tick. "The golf course and the pub remain the main sites of doing business, making contacts. To play the game, you've got to imbibe this culture," said Ferial Haffajee, editor of the Mail & Guardian, addressing a meeting of the International Women's Media Foundation in July this year.

When editors - people who tailor how others read the news - say: "Do we really have to give women four months maternity leave? It's ridiculous. Why do I have to pay a premium for female skills. Eish!" We know for sure that while perceptions are changing and that gender disparity in the work place is easingâ€¦ it's still going to be a generation or two before an almost automatic, symptomatic and ingrained discrimination against the fairer sex is behind us.