

Thandeka Nombanjinji-Nzama digging deep to change the construction landscape

While much progress has been made, many key economic sectors in South Africa - including construction - remain dominated by men. Soweto's Thandeka Nombanjinji-Nzama is working at steadily building a new gender narrative for the built environment with the hopes of transforming the landscape into one that is more equitable and accessible for women.



Starting her own business has always featured on Nombanjinji-Nzama's agenda, thanks to the influence of her entrepreneurial parents. Especially her late father and property developer Ligwa Nombanjinji who has been instrumental in this: "My mom and dad both were entrepreneurs, and they grounded me and taught me the values of running your own show," she says. "My father was the one who introduced me to my passion, construction, and equipped me with the business acumen to start on my own. It is because of him that I am not afraid to get my hands dirty."

Whilst gender roles weren't an issue at home, Nombanjinji-Nzama soon realised this didn't apply to the rest of society. "When I worked as a construction intern, I realised how very few women, especially women of colour, worked in the sector, let alone heading up these building companies," the 38-year-old recalls.

Her statements correspond with the October 2018 Construction Industry Development Board's quarterly report which shows only 11% of all construction professionals are female. That figure is even lower when looking at women of colour, especially in leadership roles.



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Challenges working in the industry

Being in the minority, Nombanjini-Nzama

recalls how challenging it was to work as a young woman in the sector. “I have experienced the harshness of the industry first-hand. People judged me based on my gender, assuming I would fail because I was a woman.”



It didn't take long before she decided she wanted to make construction more diverse and inclusive and fight the patriarchal challenges female construction professionals face. “I knew I had to do this from the inside out, meaning I had to start my business.”

This led to the launch of Mbokodo Building in 2008, a 100% female-led and owned general and civil engineering company that has realised R200m worth of projects. These include an RDP housing project in Gugulethu, Cape Town, water and sanitation infrastructure in Johannesburg, a primary school commissioned by AngloGold Ashanti, and various other developments, from libraries to railway bridges.

Construction entrepreneur Thandeka Nombanjini-Nzama



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Fulfilling its gender gap mandate

In the meantime, the company is working hard to fulfil its gender gap mandate, which revolves around the training, empowering, upskilling and employing of women in the sector and helping them excel. So far, over 80 women have been given work opportunities, with more on the cards as the company grows.

“Look, the time to talk is over. We have spoken about gender inequality for decades. It is time for us to walk the talk,” Nombanjini-Nzama says, noting that empowering women and getting them working is not just beneficial for women and their families, but for the country as a whole. “As Michelle Obama once said: 'No country can ever truly flourish if it stifles the potential of its women and deprives itself of the contributions of half of its citizens'.”

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