

Female titans of tech in South Africa

By [Onyi Nwaneri](#)

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We are in the midst of a technological revolution set to disrupt the world as we know it. In the World Economic Forums (WEF) *2017 Future of Jobs and Skills in Africa* report it is predicted that by 2030, 41% of all work activities in South Africa will be automated. The next ten years will be a challenging period of fast-paced technological advancements whose rapid application will cause abrupt changes in society. It is a fact that the youth of today will have to be guided through this era of transformation to prepare them for tomorrow.



Image source: Gallo/Getty

None more so than young women. The female population of a country is one of its greatest resources because when more women work, economies grow. In the context of our evolving technological landscape, providing encouragement and opportunity for girls and women in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) and ICT (information and communication technology) subjects is one of the most powerful ways of harnessing this resource for the development of the country. For this to happen we need the current band of successful women in these sectors to share their narratives and encourage an appetite for it, creating an enabling environment that allows women opportunities for upliftment and a level playing field for inclusivity in the local tech sector. The world cannot afford to deprive itself of women's talent in sectors in which talent is already rare.

Unfortunately, many of the conversations taking place around women in tech lean towards what is lacking as opposed to celebrating the many amazing pioneers already succeeding in the industry, breaking new ground and paving the way for the younger female generation.



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Inspirational movers and shakers

In nearly all sectors of business in South Africa there have been, and continue to be, inspirational female movers and shakers who are influencing the future generation. For example: Dr Margaret Mkhosi was the first black woman in South Africa to attain her PhD in Nuclear Engineering; Dr Mamphela Ramphele was the first South African to be appointed as one of four managing directors of the World Bank; Maria Ramos was CEO of ABSA for ten years after serving as director-general of the National Treasury; Gill Marcus was the first woman to hold the position of governor of the South African Reserve Bank; Phuthi Mahanyele-Dabengwa has just taken on the role of CEO at Naspers SA, the company's first female and first black chief executive - and currently the only black woman to run a JSE-listed top 40 company; Shirley Machaba has been appointed as PwC's first black CEO for Southern Africa; and Mandisa Mfeka has just been named the world's first black African female fighter pilot.

In terms of ICT, there are numerous women heading up SA's regional offices of multinational tech companies like Nunu Ntshingila, CEO of Facebook Africa; Rehana Hassim, executive head of digital and lifestyle content at Vodacom; Videsha Proothveerajh, EMEA strategic growth director at Intel Corporation; and Lillian Barnard, managing director at Microsoft South Africa.

"The technology revolution has begun in Africa, and it's going to empower and enable us to do more than ever before. Approximately 80% of jobs created in the next ten years will require a blend of science, technology, engineering and maths, but right now only about 30% of the science and technology workforce in Africa is comprised of women – indicating a massive gap that urgently needs to be addressed. The jobs of the future will all be driven by technology. We need to create an environment where young women feel empowered to enter careers in science and technology, to continue closing the gender gap and become our future leaders," says Barnard.



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Networking mediums

Leaders such as these are trailblazers for women in the current generation, motivating women into leading roles and driving innovation. We see further progress when we look at the growing number of networking mediums in the country such as the SA Women in ICT Forum, Black Women in Science and Women in Tech Africa Summit.

According to the World Economic Forum's *2018 Global Gender Gap Report*, only 13% of SA graduates in the STEM and ICT fields are women, despite the country being ranked 19th out of 144 countries and one of only three countries in the world with the smallest gender gap in the AI (artificial intelligence) talent pool, where an average of 28% of the pool is female.

Again, both in the public and private sector, we must have role models that are strong influencers but also leadership bodies

that reflect the society we live in. Bridging the gender divide in tech requires an inclusive approach and a collaborative effort from everyone in the sector, so it was encouraging to hear that at the ITU Telecom World Conference in September 2018 deputy minister of telecommunications and postal services Stella Ndabeni-Abrahams committing to training 100 girls a year from each province in ICT skills in an effort to increase the confidence of women in digital literacy.

The ICT industry is currently the most interesting and progressive of all with so much potential for women in South Africa to thrive, and we must acknowledge and thank the women that stand as beacons of hope and inspiration for so many looking to enter the realm of tech in this new age.

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