

'We women need to help our sisters reach for the stars' - Onyi Nwaneri, Afrika Tikkun Services

Despite progress made on the gender rights front since South Africa's first democratic elections, a lot of work remains to be done, says Onyi Nwaneri, human rights lawyer by trade and CEO of Afrika Tikkun Services.



Onyi Nwaneri, CEO of Afrika Tikkun Services

Women and girls remain disproportionately affected by crime, sexual violence, poverty, hunger, and unemployment, she says, but that is not because they are less capable. Data by the Department of Basic Education shows that female matriculants perform better than their male counterparts: in 2017, girls attained 62.6% of A-passes. A similar situation applies to colleges and universities, in which girls systematically outperform boys, she notes.

Despite this, women still earn 28% less than men and few make it at executive level. A 2019 PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) report shows that men account for 96.6% of CEOs, 87.2% of CFOs, and 91% of executive directors on the JSE. Redressing these gender equality challenges is urgent, says Nwaneri.

Creating value for society against all odds

"I am all about justice, empowerment, and human rights. What is dear to my heart, is helping marginalised people attain the equality they deserve. Throughout history, women and girl children have been disadvantaged but despite that, they continue to create value for society, often against all odds,"

she says. "I want a situation in which women have equal rights and opportunities, have their place recognised, be the best they can, and are treated as assets by men and society at large."

Whilst men need to come to the party, women have a vital role to play, too, she says, particularly established women who have smashed the glass ceiling. "For marginalised young women to realise they have opportunities and can change their world, and the world at large, they need successful and established women to show and tell them they can," says Nwaneri, born in 1981 in a small town in the eastern part of Nigeria as the eldest of six children, taking her childhood as an example.

From a young age, her mother, a serial entrepreneur with a PhD in educational psychology, was the one who pushed her to be her absolute best and not let any preconceived societal ideas of what women should be determine her daughter's future.

'No time for mediocrity'

"She had no time for mediocrity. Being the first of six meant I had to be number one. My mother expected nothing less. From a young age, I understood my responsibility for setting the pace for my siblings," Nwaneri recalls. "Like she was a true role model to me, I had to be a role model for my siblings in terms of the friends I kept, my academic performance, and my overall behaviour. Having my mother, a successful entrepreneur, as my mentor and coach helped me shape my life."

After serving as a commercial and litigation lawyer and later a human rights lawyer, focusing on the human rights of people wrongfully detained or denied legal and social justice in her own country, Nwaneri ended up working for the United Nations Development Programme as a consultant. "This was a year after I moved from Cape Town to Johannesburg for another job. My task at the UN was to advise on the legal framework governing National Aids Commissions in six African countries,"

Nwaneri says, noting she joined youth empowerment NPO Afrika Tikkun in 2009, initially in a business development capacity.

Over time, she climbed the ladder to become CEO of Afrika Tikkun Services in 2019, one of the three driving entities of the Afrika Tikkun Group. Afrika Tikkun Services is a level two black-owned recruitment, training and placement company designed to help corporate clients evaluate their transformation mandate and build solutions that align with their social and business requirements. The company aims to transform the lives of South African young people and prepare them for participating constructively in the country's economy.

Inspiring girls and young women

Besides helping South African youth excel and break the cycle of poverty, Nwaneri's quest is to use her latest achievement to inspire girls and young women, particularly those from disadvantaged communities, that they can achieve greatness, despite their situation.

"That is what Women's Month, to me, is all about. It is not just to pay tribute to and celebrate the women who have achieved significant strides in their life and professional career. It is about collectively changing society for the better. It is also a call to action to challenge established women to accelerate the role they play in helping younger women, particularly those from less fortunate backgrounds, break their own glass ceilings. We women need to help our sisters reach for the stars, just like our mothers and grandmothers helped us," says Nwaneri.

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