

# Bursting through glass ceilings for a better tomorrow

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Motivated by using numbers to tell the story of how public entities are meeting the needs of South Africans, Bongzi Ngoma, head of Audit at the Auditor-General South Africa (AGSA), was recognised by the African Women Chartered Accountants (AWCA) as the chief financial officer (CFO) of 2021, and was historically awarded the Transformation and Empowerment Award in the public sector at the annual CFO awards of the same year.



Bongzi Ngoma, AGSA CFO

These accolades are a culmination of a lifetime of resilience, courage, determination, and an unwavering effort to challenge the status quo. As one of three siblings raised by a single mom, Ngoma is no stranger to roads less travelled, particularly by black women.

When asked about her willingness to make courageous choices and decisions that would positively change the course of her life and that of her family, Ngoma attributes it all to her mom who had the foresight to dream, the courage to persevere, and the self-belief to break through proverbial glass ceilings. While raising her family single-handedly, her mom obtained two degrees during some of the darkest days of apartheid. She ultimately rose from the ranks of teacher to that of inspector of schools, thus joining a handful of black women who held this position at the time; an inspired Ngoma realised the possibility of achieving the impossible.

Her mom imparted values that continue to be a guiding light in her life; the pursuit of excellence above all else, resilience, optimism and the importance of using what you have at your disposal. Ngoma and her siblings would aspire to a life from books and magazines that her mom would come home with, offering a perspective of the world that they did not see every day. Nostalgia kicks in as she asks how a child can dream about what they have not seen. “Despite our circumstances, dreaming is free, it is not constrained by your reality and remains a powerful force of creation. Yet a child cannot dream of what he or she cannot imagine. However, it is true that, the bigger the vision, the bigger the accomplishment. Those magazines were my window to dreams that became motivating forces in my life,” she says.

Seemingly, her accounting career came because of fate. She was particularly inspired by the story of Nonkululeko Gobodo, South Africa’s first black female chartered accountant [CA(SA)], which was her mainstay. “In a country where race, class and gender pre-determined your status in life, she was limitless. Her story became my mainstay and in my darkest and most difficult days, would help me to take one more step, fight one more day, and take one more breath,” remembers Ngoma.

Her path was not without challenges. She pursued her accounting degree at the then University of Natal's Howard College in KwaZulu-Natal. Her studies were initially funded by her mom, for whom no sacrifice for her children's future was too great. Following her securing of good grades in her first year, Ngoma received bursaries from Toyota and Kellogg's.

Armed with her first degree, she left university to begin her articles so that she could take some of the financial pressure off her mom and help with her siblings.

As a young graduate, she took the opportunity to do her articles at Ernst and Young (EY). After completing her articles, Ngoma was employed by the Industrial Development Co-operation (IDC) where she navigated various portfolios for 13 years.

Describing her time at the IDC, Ngoma says, "I was shaped by that organisation. The culture demanded excellence but it was also nurturing and encouraged growth – both personal and professional," she said.

Ngoma joined the AGSA in November 2012 as an executive responsible for Internal Operations, which was later restructured into a CFO position, a position she held until June 2021, when she was appointed as the national head of Audit.

When reflecting on why she does what she does with such commitment, excitement and enthusiasm, Ngoma said she sees herself as a growth catalyst. Her passion is people and the country, and she intends to use her current role to augment her past focus on driving accountability and pursuing excellence.

And where does she see herself continuing to contribute to the country and its people? "I want young professionals to develop resilience and know that there are no limits to what they can create. Circumstances are seasonal; they do not constrain what we can be and what we can create if we master the skills to navigate through them by knowing what to ask for and how, and more importantly, be willing to work for what we dream of. Resilience is the breeding ground of excellence, coupled with discipline and commitment – it all does pay off," she says.

Today I am honoured and awed by these accolades. Yet, the road ahead of me is still long. South Africa still needs each of us to build a capable state characterised by professionalism, excellence and an unwavering commitment to service.

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