

Women in entrepreneurship

 By [Pasqua Heard](#)

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Zimkhitha Peter, head of programmes at [Allan Gray Orbis Foundation](#) and a firm believer in effecting social change through entrepreneurship, discusses the underrepresentation of women in the industry and how to cultivate young entrepreneurs in South Africa.

Peter is mainly responsible for the Foundation's Scholarship Fellowship Association Programme as well as their support programme called Programmes Management and Data Centre. Her role focuses on ensuring the strategic alignment of the Foundation's scholarship and fellowship in association programmes to ensure that they can achieve their ultimate vision of cultivating a community of high growth, responsible entrepreneurs.



Zimkhitha Peter

■ Who or what inspired you to enter your field of work?

I was born in Red Location, New Brighton, PE, and I was in Grade 9 when my grandmother's sister from Lesotho visited our family. When she saw the circumstances, she supported me and paid for me to go to boarding school and finish matric. She also made a contribution towards my tertiary education. What she did inspired me to do this work, because I realised that once people have potential and someone is willing to share their resources and create an enabling environment for that person, that person can succeed. I thought that if someone could do that for me, I wish to spend the rest of my life doing it for other people.

■ In your opinion, in what areas does SA succeed at entrepreneurship and in what areas does it need to improve?

I'll probably be biased with this one, but I think we need to improve on really cultivating that mindset at an early age. Most countries where people are entrepreneurial don't start at a late age, they start at a very early age. The more we can see that happening at a primary school level and at a high school level, that will help us to go far. I think we start too late in SA or we don't even have it in our consciousness.

For instance, Israel is considered to be one of the most entrepreneurial countries, despite being a relatively young country.

As a leader in entrepreneurship, in recent years the Israeli Foreign Ministry has hosted delegations of leading educators from around the world to learn the "secrets" that have made a small country into a start-up nation, how Israel encourages entrepreneurship education from an early age, and how to educate young students in entrepreneurship. There is an [Entrepreneurship for Kids Programme](#) in Israeli schools.

As for where we are doing well, I think we have started to talk about entrepreneurship a bit more. I think the government setting up a small business strategy, which has a dedicated minister, shows some intentionality of trying to make entrepreneurship high up and even on the government agenda. Minister Lindiwe Zulu once said, "The establishment of Centres for Entrepreneurship is consistent with our vision of building a nation of entrepreneurs."

In addition to this, the Foundation was part of the Enabling Entrepreneurship Task Team of the South African Human Resource Council that sits with the presidency.

There is also a slight increase in Incubation Support Programmes. Two centres of Entrepreneurship at FET colleges have been established, such as the False Bay Campus.

■ **How can greater representation of women in entrepreneurship be achieved?**

I think that we still have a long way to go in this regard. I think that we need to engage directly with female entrepreneurs and the aspiring entrepreneurs, so that we are able to design support programmes that are geared directly to solve the challenges that female entrepreneurs are facing. Whilst I do not have immediate answers on this issue, I am convinced that there is a need for a focused approach and focus interventions. At the Foundation, we have now put this issue on our agenda for 2017, as to how do we create an enabling environment for our aspiring female entrepreneurs (both candidate Fellows and Fellows).

■ **What skills and values do you intend for Allan Gray Orbis Foundation's entrepreneurs to possess?**

The biggest value we try to cultivate in our fellows and hope that they espouse is this entire notion of 'responsible entrepreneurship'. There are debates on what being a responsible entrepreneur means. On one side it means clean business and doing things ethically, but for us, it's more than that, we believe that all business can be for social good. Fellows are encouraged and supported to start businesses that will create value for society through their products and services, that will be profitable and sustainable and also offer meaningful employment to South Africans.

We encourage an entrepreneurial mindset, which is built around our foundation's values, including intellectual imagination. This means that we want our fellows to possess the skill of being innovative and creative.

We also want our fellows to be empowered with the right skills and processes to be able to understand what idea generation means in depth and what it means to take an idea, validate it and make sure there's a market/need for it and that it creates value.

We encourage personal initiative, which is really bias for action. We try to inculcate in the fellows the need to come up with ideas by themselves and come up with a plan for execution. *Disciplined Entrepreneurship* by Bill Aulet has been a great resource, which has helped enforce disciplined action amongst the entrepreneurs by laying down the actions that each entrepreneur needs to take. This helps people first respect entrepreneurship as a discipline and also become disciplined entrepreneurs, because outside of that hard work, tenacity, courage and risk-taking, nothing is going to succeed.

So it's not about the glitz and glamour of entrepreneurship or it being a buzzword. We want people to know that we as a foundation are not following entrepreneurship because it's the latest fad, but because we deeply believe that it will help us solve some of the social issues and therefore we want Fellows to be able to do it and do it right.

■ What advice can you give to young aspiring entrepreneurs?

They say you're not an entrepreneur until you are one. So, I think my biggest advice is that if you have an idea for something that you think will work, just go out there and test it. Failure isn't the opposite of success, especially in entrepreneurship; failure is part of the success. If you're afraid to fail, you probably won't move anywhere. Even in your loss, you still can't lose.

■ What is your message for Women's Month?

The most important thing is that we don't have to be like men to win. As women, we don't have to change ourselves and learn from the 'rules of the man'. I feel that we have the potential and something unique that we bring to boardrooms, businesses and everywhere in life. If we try to change to be like men to win, then society will be poorer, because it loses what we would've brought in as women.

We don't need to fight to be like men, we rather need to fight for the space to be created for us to be women entrepreneurs in that space.

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