

A revolution, one weld at a time

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A gender revolution has begun in what were exclusively male industries, led by a still-tiny vanguard of women artisans produced by South Africa's TVET College system.



Lee-Anne Occupational Boilermaker / Welders lecturer at False Bay TVET College, Candra Pedro first female Trade Tested Shipbuilder in South Africa and Ndileka Ndzolo, False Bay TVET College Trade Test Coordinator

It's pretty much a given that any schoolgirl (or schoolboy) asked to describe a 'boilermaker' or 'shipbuilder' will not imagine anyone remotely like Lee-Anne Andrews or Candra Pedro, but this is destined to change if they have anything to do with it. And it's not just because gender prejudice and stereotypes have no place in our democracy.

With the country experiencing an official unemployment rate of 27,6% and a youth unemployment rate of 63,4%, our economy needs double the number of artisans it currently produces annually if it is to grow to a level that provides decent work for everyone. There's no time to wait for everyone to get with the (gender equity) programme.

In Lee-Anne's case, that programme was the newly launched NC(V) Engineering Fabrication certificate course in which she enrolled at Northlink College in 2008. After passing many of the 21 subjects with distinction, she joined Damen Shipping as an Apprentice Boilermaker in 2011 and passed her trade test in Boilermaking in May 2013, becoming the first female boilermaker in South Africa. Only 27 years old, Lee-Anne is a lecturer at False Bay TVET College.

With a father and brother being artisans, Bonteheuwel-born Candra began making unusual but natural choices in high school already, including taking Woodwork as a subject. After matriculating at Spes Bona High in 2010, she enrolled for the N5 level National Certificate in Multi-Disciplinary Drawing Office Practice. Soon thereafter, she saw an Armscor advert for a shipbuilding apprenticeship, immediately applied and was placed in the Shipbuilding Apprenticeship Programme based at Simonstown Dockyard. After completing her Structural Steel and Plating N2 Certificate at Northlink College and six years of work to meet the work experience requirement, she took the trade test at False Bay TVET College in May 2019.

Lee-Anne says, "As the first qualified female boilermaker I felt honoured to test Candra during her Shipbuilding trade test. I admired her confident ability to perform under tremendous pressure. I'm really proud of her for setting a benchmark and being so inspiring to other young women."

False Bay TVET College Trade Test Centre coordinator, Ndileka Ndzolo, is quick to disabuse anyone from thinking that the path female artisans choose is easy.

“The artisan environment is not easy at all. Having been a male-dominated environment historically, learning and succeeding in it requires a lot of courage, focus, determination and resilience.”

Despite this, Ndzolo says there has been a substantial increase in females successfully completing trade tests, “especially in the past two years or so”, which she ascribes to the DHET’s strategy from around 2014 of publicising artisanship through national roadshows.

Candra says her male supervisors and head artisans were protective of her as the only female and the youngest apprentice in her class. That doesn’t mean she had an easier ride but she is grateful to the staff for always pushing her to do more, especially now-retired Shipbuilding Training Officer, Rafieq Fisher. Candra’s achievement no doubt had the added value of helping her class and workmates to see their trades less in terms of gender and more in terms of competence and skill.

Having blazed the trail, Lee-Anne and Candra feel more women will become artisans, as role models now exist who proved that it can be done. Says Candra, “if you can stand heights and tight spaces and getting dirty, all you need to succeed is determination, perseverance and self-belief.”

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