

STEM-awareness programmes paramount to raising gender parity

 By [Sindy Peters](#)

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Santhum Moodley is a regional sales manager for Clariant Sub-Saharan Africa, focusing on personal care ingredients and premium cosmetic formulations that are sustainable, innovative, and aligned to progressive, green industry practices. Her role at Clariant involves connecting with change-makers who play an instrumental role in driving the industry towards more ecological products for customers.

We chatted to Moodley to find out more about her background and her professional journey thus far, what her role at Clariant entails, her thoughts on how we can drive greater gender parity in STEM-based industries, and advice she has for women pursuing a career in STEM today.

■ Tell us a bit about yourself - your background?

Santhum Moodley: From a very young age, I believed that protecting nature is something that I wanted to be part of. Being able to make a positive contribution to the environment and to people through my work is what keeps me passionate about what I do. As such, I have worked for companies that have allowed me the opportunity to do just that.

I have been part of the Clariant Industrial & Consumer Specialities Unit as a regional sales manager for the past four years. Prior to that, I have another ten years of working experience in different roles for other organisations. What was interesting about my career journey is that when I was at school, having a natural aptitude for Accounting, I received a bursary to study this at university. My science marks were not as great and yet my imprudent brave resolve was sealed in the direction of animal science.

I can still remember the look on my teachers' faces, as if I was about to make a big mistake. Graduation and success did not come easy, however, I was not a fan of things that come "easy". The degree in Biochemistry gave so much dimension to science in everyday life that I really enjoyed, but the biggest treasure were the postgrad Zoological studies – I am ever so grateful for the seemingly strange but immensely fulfilling direction.



Santhum Moodley, regional sales manager for Clariant Sub-Saharan Africa



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■ Describe your role at Clariant - what does a typical workday look like for you?

Moodley: I focus on personal care ingredients and premium cosmetic formulations to support hair and skincare locally and globally. My typical workday includes working with the research and development (R&D) team on sustainable ingredients that are innovative and aligned to progressive, green industry practices. I also work with the sales and marketing team to drive the message about why manufacturers should consider adopting these ingredients in their products. One of our aims is to help manufacturers advance their product offering in a sustainable way. As such, my role requires that I have a good understanding of our market, its needs and ensuring we connect with change and decision-makers who

play an instrumental part in effecting product changes which further evolves the industry towards more ecological products for customers.

■ As a woman, have there been any significant challenges in the workplace that stand out for you?

Moodley: In the organisation I work for, I haven't per se experienced significant challenges as I work in a team that constitutes a dynamic demography of individuals driven by a collaborative-solution ethos. We are guided by the respect we have for each other as professionals irrespective of our diverse backgrounds. The focus has always been to recognise individuals for the value that they add. This makes for a fun and creative working environment. Working with this team has always felt very empowering also because Clariant is very invested in the growth of its people and ensures that it not only attracts the right talent, but it also provides equal opportunities to all its employees. Everyone here matters.

In my journey, however, it hasn't always been this way. Early on in my career I was expected to hold a desk job, not being able to travel into Africa purely because of gender. I am grateful to the mentors I met along my journey who encouraged me to venture beyond these unwitting, mental boundaries. It was the affirmation I needed to free my fears and explore my potential. This continent is bursting with opportunity and I am thrilled to be a part of this journey with multiple stamps in my Clariant passport as my curiosity ropes me into a broader strategy. What's next? – #africaisanotacountry



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■ To what do you attribute the low percentage of women in STEM-related sectors?

Moodley: A research study by the PWC published over last year indicated that the reason for low representation of women in STEM-related sectors is due to the small number of girls pursuing science, technology and mathematics subjects in high school and that this number continues to decline until tertiary-level education. There are numerous contributing factors, but the most obvious has been that STEM fields have traditionally been perceived to attract more men than women, which has shaped societal perceptions of these fields.

Another reason could be that this has been a male-driven area of expertise and there is still the stigma attached to women who pursue this as a career path. However, we have seen an increase in awareness efforts over the past years to expose more girls to STEM fields. These tied to the changes in behavioural and cultural practices, along with awareness programmes that promote participation, will play a crucial role in diversifying these fields.

■ How can we drive greater gender parity in STEM-based industries?

Moodley: The current STEM-awareness programmes are paramount to raising gender parity. What we need to see more of is the support of these programmes to ensure that the youth and more women are involved and exposed to STEM industries. Sometimes it isn't about demography but individual interests, and exposing these individuals to the right careers within the STEM fields, and promoting the narrative that you can be anything when you work hard.



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■ Where, do you believe, does the value lie in a diverse, inclusive work environment, particularly in terms of female representation?

Moodley: The more dynamic and diverse a team is, the more prone it is to achieve greater results. Diversity and inclusion in the workplace play a crucial role in fostering a positive environment that enables greater growth and understanding of various backgrounds and perceptions. This is instrumental in realising collective goals.

In terms of women representation, I have worked with many great women and men, and I can say with certainty, they are all in these positions because they are not only hard working professionals, merited for the kind of work they do, but they also play an integral role in areas of innovation and expansion which are often informed by their various backgrounds, which speaks to diversity and representation.

■ Based on your experience, what advice would you give to women pursuing a career in STEM today?

Moodley: Be unwavering in your resolve for what you're passionate about. Work hard, listen, learn to foster great relationships and network with subject matter experts in your industry. What is also very important is finding a mentor (can be more than one) who will assist you as you journey through your career, and help you find balance between work and personal growth. I also believe that women and men in the field have a role to play in becoming mentors for our youth as a means of supporting and facilitating growth of women and youth in these fields and may others.



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■ How is Clariant supporting and empowering women in STEM/business in general?

Moodley: Clariant affords women employees the opportunity to upskill themselves for roles in leadership within the organisation. We believe diversity and inclusion together with empowerment are instrumental in adding value to the business and for its growth. These are some of the core values that will aid the country and all its industries to move forward together.

■ Do you have any pearls of wisdom to share this Women's Month or words of encouragement?

Moodley: I am fortunate to have parents and grandparents that raised me to not be defined by gender, race and financial wealth, but by purpose and community value. This is because everyone has the potential to become who they are meant to be. Every single individual, woman or man, has a purpose and it is important that you work towards realising that. Deterrence always serves as a lesson and we should make it a habit to recognise that challenges, however big or small, are tests that moulds ones character. All efforts, big or small, have outcomes.

ABOUT SINDY PETERS

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