

# Investing in women will make a difference

Having benefitted from opportunities, mentorship and hard work herself, Mellony Ramalho, Africa Bank's group executive: sales, branch network, believes women, especially young women, need to be shown that there are possibilities and taught that through hard work they too can succeed.



Mellony Ramalho, African Bank's group executive: sales, branch network

"I entered the workforce in 1990 with my matric certificate and some casual retail experience but with no degree, no banking experience, no computer skills, no car and no drivers licence. I was thrilled when I eventually succeeded in landing a filing clerk position in a new credit card division," she says. Now, 27 years later, Ramalho is one of 10 executives at the helm of reshaping African Bank into a retail bank.

She says that many women are now the main breadwinners in their families, educators to their children and form the support structures of their communities. "For these and many other reasons, we believe that investing in women will have major long-term positive effects on our economy, communities, family structures and values."

Therefore, African Bank supports various initiatives aimed to do just that.

## Focusing on life after Grade 12

She highlights the Grade 11 mentorship programme where 12 female learners, identified as the top achievers in the three schools. Focusing on life after Grade 12, the programme equipped the girls with various skills to help them prepare for the challenges ahead. This will include assistance with choosing a higher education institution, entrance requirements, fees and accessing bursaries. Another component involves soft skills like managing finances and public speaking. "Where necessary, we will offer financial assistance to enable these girls to attend university."

The now Grade 12 learners have already met with experts based in fields that they are interested in, received tutorial lessons prior to exams and had career guidance assessments. "We are currently in the process of assisting the girls with university and bursary applications and continue to meet with them every month," says Ramalho.

## Access to sanitary products

One in five girls in South Africa missing approximately five days of school every month due to the lack of access to sanitary

products. “We host and support several events throughout the year where we visit schools and invite speakers to offer mentoring and career guidance as well as information on personal hygiene. We also hand out goodie bags and sanitary pads to the young women.

We believe every girl in South Africa deserves access to safe and hygienic sanitary products. If we can help make a small difference and make a positive impact on these young lives, we can eliminate many of the taboos that still exist and help reduce the high number of school absenteeism and drop-outs which still exist in many schools around the country,” she says.

## **Sport and ECD**

Sport is also a great way to reach girls and women and nurture talent, and the bank’s Let’s Play Netball initiative was started four years ago, with primary and high school girls in the townships of Uitenhage where extra-mural sports and activities are almost non-existent. It is now a successful upliftment programme with the teams dominating the scene in the Eastern Cape.

“Another initiative and perhaps the most important, is the early childhood development (ECD) programme we support through Early Inspiration. ECD is possibly the biggest blind spot in our education crisis,” says Ramalho.

“As with all our projects, we invest in people, not just projects. We have very close relationships with all our project leaders, and in the early childhood development (ECD) space we developed a relationship with Dr Lauren Stretch, the managing director of Early Inspiration,” explains Ramalho.

“We’ve been involved with the project for five years and covers the costs for the education of 24 women in the Eastern Cape, and 24 women in the Western Cape, who were formerly unqualified crèche teachers. The programme takes these women from being basic child minders to be qualified ECD practitioners. “We also support the Home Visit Programme and Parent Support intervention where children in Nelson Mandela Bay are visited twice monthly for one-on-one support and guidance is provided for their parents,” she says.

I believe that by investing in these women through all these initiatives, we are supporting and enabling them to make choices that will make a difference,” concludes Ramalho.