

5 ways to empower women in the workplace

International Women's Day took place on Wednesday, 8 March 2023, and in honour of it, 54TwentyFour founder Julia Makhubela shares her thoughts on how companies can embrace equity in the South African workplace.



Julia Makhubela, 54TwentyFour founder

“There are several small organisations that run their agencies intentionally, consciously, quietly and make decisions that interrupt the status quo. These decisions ensure a more humane, inclusive working environment and it is time for bigger organisations to follow suit,” she says.

Makhubela believes there are five key points that need addressing for change to happen.

- **Promote women to leadership positions**

A meagre 7% of JSE-listed companies have women in executive-level roles (*Business Live*, November 2022). This, Makhubela says, is simply not enough. “Without women in leadership positions, nothing is really going to change.”

Indeed, it all starts in the boardroom at an executive level. “I’d like to see companies set and meet a target of having qualified women on their boards. Platitudes alone really don’t mean much.”

- **Help the working mother juggle her responsibilities**

The ideal worker in 2023 is still someone who arrives early, leaves late and puts in long hours. Makhubela says that women are often seen as less than ideal workers because they have children to look after.

“Of course, equality can't happen if women are excluded because of their familial responsibilities. So if companies are serious about equity, they need to adapt to accommodate the working mom. Whether that means flexible working hours, or scheduling meetings after 9am to allow time for the school rush, there are practical solutions that need considering.”

- **Close the pay gap!**

The pay gap still exists, and it's especially rampant in South Africa. Last year, Emily Xin of The Borgen Project reported that men are earning between 23% to 35% more than their female counterparts. What's more, this is 20% above the global average.

“Companies need to do an audit of what the expected salary is for all roles within their businesses, look at whether their pay rate is fair, and then take a look at whether their men and women employees in the same role are being paid equally,” Makhubela says. “Women have been socialised to ask for less but this does mean that they should be paid less.”

In the UK, many firms are transparent about the median salary inside the building, and whether men or women at the company earn more on average. These reports are anonymous (no names are mentioned) but give workers an idea of whether they should be pushing for more in future. In South Africa, a similar culture of transparency could be a great help.

- **Embrace a culture of care!**

Unilever is the most recent example of a multinational firm taking women's needs seriously. It plans to extend the window for paid maternity leave, while also offering paid leave for real-world occurrences like menstruation, miscarriage and stillbirth.

But these measures are just the tip of the iceberg. Makhubela believes the paradigm shift will only take place when companies fully embrace a culture of care. It could be small things, like letting everyone in a meeting speak uninterrupted, to big things, like providing proper support to a victim of sexual harassment. “The equity infrastructure needs a trauma-informed environment to look after women who have been targeted,” Makhubela says. “This includes physical, psychological and emotional support.”

- **Abolish gender assumptions!**

Assumptions are often problematic, and they can be hurtful to women in the workplace. Makhubela outlines a few examples.

“At meetings, women will often be asked to take the coffee/lunch order, even when there's a perfectly reasonable junior man to do the task. This speaks to the assumption that women are there to serve and assist.

“Another: child-rearing or pregnant women are often thought to be less committed to their careers as their co-workers. This limits career opportunities for mothers, and the assumption is often demonstrably false.

“Three: there's the assumption that a person's gender should match their sexual orientation. Women who might not present as feminine are often treated with malice and distrust.

“And finally: women are regularly labelled ‘more emotional’ than men. In reality, all human beings feel emotions, and it

all depends on temperament and personality type. Nonetheless, this stigma persists, and it means women are overlooked in times of crisis.”

In summary, Makhubela paraphrases a line from Maya Angelou’s poem, Our Grandmothers. “To achieve equity, all companies ‘must come as one but stand as ten thousand’. That’s how we’ll truly see change.”

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