

Is it only the “Nasty Woman” who can break the glass ceiling?

By [Lauren Durant](#)

28 Jul 2017

Gender inequality at work remains an issue for women across all industries - not only in South Africa but on a global scale. Women work twice as hard for half the recognition while juggling families; they are still paid less for positions of equal status to men; and to this day there is still a pervasive presence of “a boy’s club” in many organisations. Ashley Judd’s passionate and fiery “Nasty Woman” speech delivered at the DC Women’s March earlier this year [January 2017] - the largest public rally for women’s rights in recent history - is evidence that women are becoming increasingly more vocal against this disparity - and rightly so.



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Stats that prove this is not just women getting worked up and “emotional” – a label too readily assigned to women standing up for their rights – include:

- According to the World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Report 2016 – women around the world work an average of 39 days per year more than men do. And women currently have access to only 59% of the economic advantages enjoyed by men.
- It’s been suggested in the same Gender Gap Report that it will take another 170 years before there is global equality of the sexes.
- At Davos in Switzerland in January this year, not even 50% of those voicing their opinions were women. Out of the 3,000 participants, just 21% were woman – an improvement on the 18% seen in 2016 – but it’s still a far cry from where it should be.
- While it’s true that well-educated women are moving up the corporate ranks, disproportionately few reach the summit and female CEOs in the Fortune 500 aren’t the norm yet. According to Fortune Magazine – as of 2017, there are 32 female CEOs on the list, meaning that 6.4% of the US’s biggest companies (by revenue) are run by women.

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On review of these facts – what's most surprising is that women are still facing these age old challenges some 61 years after the Women's March to the Union Buildings to protest the pass laws of the day. Secondly and perhaps more disturbingly – is that so many women don't support each other and instead treat female colleagues as adversaries to be taken out for the competition they are [perceived to be]. Rather than standing together – they go head to head and even consciously undermine their female colleagues.

Remove possible barriers to women's advancement

As a woman who is passionate about supporting the growth of female work colleagues – I abhor this practice and encourage women to put aside petty insecurities so that all women can enjoy professional respect and career fulfilment. Other possible barriers to women's advancement include: structural/physical obstacles, lifestyle choices, institutional mind-sets, and individual mind-sets.



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Although many leadership teams work at removing organisational barriers – addressing unconscious biases and limited flexibility of hours for example – many of these hurdles are deeply intertwined, making them even harder to eliminate. Interestingly many of the prejudices and preconceived notions are held and upheld by women too!

So what's to be done about a problem that's so engrained?

Talk is cheap and mission statements too easily hung on the wall. I believe closing the gender gap takes action driven by commitment from the top down. But it's ultimately women who have the power to help their peers succeed. All it takes is one woman to break the mold within an organisation.

I also believe in tapping into the most potent and often under-used resource – female talent. As every corporate ladder-climber knows – having a seasoned guide can make all the difference so nurturing and mentoring women coming through the ranks has become a way of life for me. My approach to tackling the system that prevents women from getting the jobs they deserve, includes consciously adopting new behaviours, including:

Build – don't breakdown: As a female leader, it's not sufficient to just help build skills – it's also necessary to bolster

aspiration and confidence. Talent and skills will only get you so far – attitude and resilience are the difference. Advancing in a career takes energy and tenacity and women become discouraged when faced with the limitations of a glass ceiling. So champion women – advocating on their behalf – rather than just supporting them. We can't afford to lose talented women who opt out or are overlooked so build the spirit that's needed to cross the finish line.

Be a good role model: Diverse businesses are successful businesses but a lack of role models for women will keep them staring at that glass ceiling. Mentor groups of women coming through the ranks by offering coaching, including specific and workable feedback, explaining where they are doing well, where they need to improve, and how you can help. Research shows that more regular feedback – daily moments of truth – is more beneficial than reviews twice a year. So build hope in the boardroom and the corridors as a daily occurrence.

Be honest: Keep communication channels open and talk freely about your own career development and the challenges you face and have overcome. You will become more human and nothing beats authenticity and builds trust quite like personal sharing.

Support the entire person: Have conversations about how to juggle the responsibilities of being a woman. Merge home and work life in a way that keeps her professional direction on track. It's important to ensure that your staff can pursue interests outside of work while still advancing their career ambitions.

Exposure: Make sure you expose your female staff to new opportunities – give them responsibilities that ensure they have visibility in their department. The more exposure women have in the office – and the more they are exposed to leaders and decision makers in the business – the more potential they have for being offered breaks in the future. This includes offering them the training they need to unlock their potential.

Be an “Olivia Pope”

It's time more of us stood up like the Ashley Judd's and Olivia Pope's of this world – both for ourselves and for our female colleagues. There is room for all kinds of women with different personalities to succeed in a corporate environment. We need to stop being so timid and modest. We have a responsibility to our self and to other women. It's time to rewrite the history books. It's time to own our rightful place in the boardrooms of South Africa and while we can't directly change what's happening at Davos – we need to commit to ensuring our organisations are diverse, inclusive and support gender equity, all the while helping our female colleagues along the way.

ABOUT LAUREN DURANT

With 23 years in the marketing industry, Isilunko Activate executive Lauren Durant has no difficulty helping companies build emotional connections between their brands and their customers through live events and crafted experiences. A left and right brain thinker, Lauren is always in beta and it's this combination that makes her a creative, yet strategic force in the industry.

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