

Gender equality top of agenda in corporate boardrooms

By [Samantha Swanepoel](#)

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Companies are being challenged by policy makers and gender activists to boost women's representation across all levels in their operations, following on successful implementations at government level.



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When it comes to politics, women have shown that they are equally capable of doing jobs that were traditionally the domain of men. As a result, we are beginning to witness the emergence of governments and cabinets that are more gender representative and inclusive, even beating private sector companies when it comes to including women in senior leadership and in the lower rungs of organisations.

Fortune 500 percentage passes 5%

Women currently hold 5.8% of CEO positions in the Fortune 500 companies. This is the first time in which the number of women holding CEO positions has scaled the 5% mark.

Mary Barra, CEO of General Motors, Virginia Rometty, CEO of IBM, and Indra Nooyi, CEO of Pepsi Corporation, are some of the 29 Fortune 500 female CEOs that have outstandingly led their companies through stormy waters and put them in a position where they are now poised for growth. Their leadership is inspiring many women around the world, who are eager to utilise their skills to contribute to the global economy.

In South Africa, strides are being made to steer our country towards building gender-representative workplaces, in both the private and public sectors. However, we are still a long way from achieving true gender equality, where our men and women are able to access workplace opportunities on an equal footing.

CEE report indicates low participation at executive level

The recently released 2016/17 annual employment equity report by the Commission for Employment Equity (CEE) indicates that there is a high level of women representation in the lower rungs of companies compared to the top, where males still hold the majority of positions at both top and senior management levels.



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This means that we need to dig deeper to achieve full gender equality in the workplace. The CEE annual report shows that representation of women at the top management level stands at 22% compared with males, who hold 78% of top management positions. At senior management level, women representation improves to 33.3% compared with that of men, which stands at 66.7%.

When you cascade down to the lower levels of companies, the report shows that women representation improves dramatically even though women are still outnumbered by men. For example, the representation of women at professionally qualified level is 45.6%; 46% at skilled technical level; 42.8% at semi-skilled level and 40.7% at unskilled level.

The figures presented above should prod us to do more as a country to empower women to become active participants in our economy.

Barloworld Equipment goal of 40/20

Barloworld Equipment has embarked on the 40/20 strategy, which aims to boost women representation to 40% across all levels of the organisation by 2020, from just under 20% currently.

We set ourselves the tough target of 40% because we are conscious that without targets, nothing gets measured and consequently nothing changes. We also know that targets mean nothing if they are not followed up by a concerted effort, hence the 40/20 strategy is designed help us attain our goal in the shortest possible time.

We are pursuing gender equality because it is a socially moral thing to do, but it is also a necessary business imperative that we believe will drive our company's financial performance and lead to greater customer satisfaction and employee retention.

Our confidence in our strategy stems from the fact that numerous studies that have been done around the world have established that there is a strong correlation between gender-balanced companies and strong financial performance.

Attracting women to mechanical engineering

As one of the world's leading dealers for Caterpillar's earthmoving machines, almost 70% of Barloworld Equipment's employees work in the company's service department, where they conduct maintenance work on large, complex earthmoving machines that are used in the mining and construction industries.

Men, who are often found wearing worker's overalls draped in oil and grease from the vehicles and machines they are fixing, have traditionally done this type of mechanical and artisan work.

To tilt the gender scales in this line of work in favour of females, the 40/20 strategy aims to attract young women into mainly mechanical engineering and artisanship positions, which are critical skills for anyone interested in working with complex earthmoving machines that Barloworld Equipment supplies to its customers.

Now, our workforce numbers reflect almost 5,000 employees, of which just under 1,000 are female.

Leadership development

In our quest to reach our objective, we have already made strides in including more women at the top management level. Currently the Barloworld Equipment executive committee includes 4 women out of 11.

The female executive directors that sit in the executive committee include myself as the divisional executive director for

marketing & communications, Hlengiwe Mazibuko, divisional executive director of IT; Andronicca Masemola, divisional executive director of Finance and Moipone Khojane, divisional executive director for legal affairs & compliance; we report directly to Emmy Leeka, CEO of Barloworld Equipment Southern Africa.

Almost two years ago we launched the Women in Leadership Development Programme (WLDP), aimed at identifying and developing women leaders who will drive our business.

We are proud to report that the first group of 17 women to participate in the programme graduated in May last year.

The programme has been so successful to an extent that we have recently taken in a second batch of women leaders, who will swell the management ranks of our company after completing the programme. The programme has also been expanded to middle and senior management.

We will spare no effort in our mission to build a truly gender-diverse workplace environment at Barloworld Equipment and contribute to the socio-economic transformation of our country.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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