

SA making notable progress in closing the gender gap

According to the World Economic Forum's 2016 Global Gender Gap Index, South Africa currently ranks 15th out of 144 countries when it comes to closing the gender gap, jumping up two positions compared to the previous year.



Christelle Colman, CEO of Europ Assistance South Africa

South Africa ranks above both the UK now in 20th place, which dropped two places from 2015, and the USA, which is now in 45th place, having plunged by 17 places.

Christelle Colman, CEO of Europ Assistance South Africa, says that South Africa is getting it right when it comes to gender equality in the workplace – especially when compared to global players. “As the CEO of the South African arm of a global company, I am exposed to various leadership cultures from a variety of other countries. Therefore, I am in the fortunate position to compare these different leadership styles to that of South Africa. I recently had a great realisation that South Africa has come a far way in creating and enabling workplaces where women are empowered and form part of the senior management.”

She says that when attending a meeting in South Africa, the chances are very good that the boardroom will consist of a 50/50 breakdown of males and females, whereas this balance has not yet been achieved in many other countries. “South Africa is definitely a leader in this area and other countries can learn from what we are doing right.”

It is so wonderful that women in South Africa have the opportunity to be part of senior executive teams and are able to empower themselves to excel at their jobs, she says.

Progressive Constitution

“One of the main reasons we rank so much better than international companies is that South Africa’s Constitution is very progressive in terms of ensuring that women are empowered and are given equal opportunities in the workplace.”

In addition to this, working mothers in South Africa are accommodated with maternity leave where moms are entitled to four months maternity leave, including a month's leave before the birth if required. While companies are not legally required to remunerate women during this period, companies are legally required to contribute to the Department of Labour's Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF) and therefore the new moms are eligible for up to 66% of their salary capped at R14,872 under the new amendments to the Unemployment Insurance Act, which were recently signed in by the president.

Working mothers face great challenges to balance the responsibilities of work and personal life, so businesses that value their employees who are working mothers have to understand that new mothers will have to focus on their family for the first few years of their children's lives, she says. "As a result, it is important to find ways to work together so that both parties are happy."

Women should not have to choose between a career and her family – they should be able to succeed in both roles, says Colman. "Therefore, she should be able to give a young child the attention it needs and as the child grows older and can take care of him/herself, the mother will be able to go back to for instance regular working hours."

Confidence in the workplace

Colman also says that it is critical that no woman should ever feel intimidated by a man in the workplace. "Many women may tend to shy away from an opportunity because a male counterpart stood up and took the chance, and the female does not want to challenge the situation. We should never be ashamed to portray confidence and stand up and state our opinion or beliefs."

"We often ask the question 'what can businesses do to adapt to be more supportive to women', but the real question we need to ask is 'what can women do to ensure that they are represented in senior roles'. I want to encourage women to push themselves and grab opportunities to showcase their expertise. We need to step up and take these challenges and overcome out-dated stereotypes that women can't do a man's job, which most men don't even regard in the modern workplace anymore."

Below Colman shares a few life hacks for women to succeed in business:

Build your brand

Use the wealth of social media platforms such as Twitter and LinkedIn to build a strong, professional personal brand and stay connected with the rest of the world. This could prove to be the key differentiator between you and your dream job.

Join a networking club

Make time and effort to join a female networking club. Here you will find like-minded women to network with, who will also understand your unique challenges as a woman in business and they will provide support through testing times.

Find your style

Being in business means that you may have no time for yourself, especially if you are a working mother. If you are clear on your personal fashion style and you keep it simple, your life will be so much easier. Dressing in the morning and packing for business trips become a breeze. My advice is first and foremost to stick with a colour theme such as black, white and cream with a splash of red on the lips, based on the great advice from the glamorous Coco Chanel.

Your health is your wealth

It does not matter how busy you are - there is always time to exercise. When your children are young, find a trainer, fitness studio or yoga class and go at 5am. This way your exercise regime will be done by the time your family wakes up and you really have no excuse. You have to be unapologetic about this alone time because your health is your wealth.

“While we are in the process of making great strides, we have to continue working towards fostering a business culture where women, and essentially younger girls, are confident and motivated to pursue their leadership goals and even improve further on our rankings for closing the gender gap,” concludes Colman.

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